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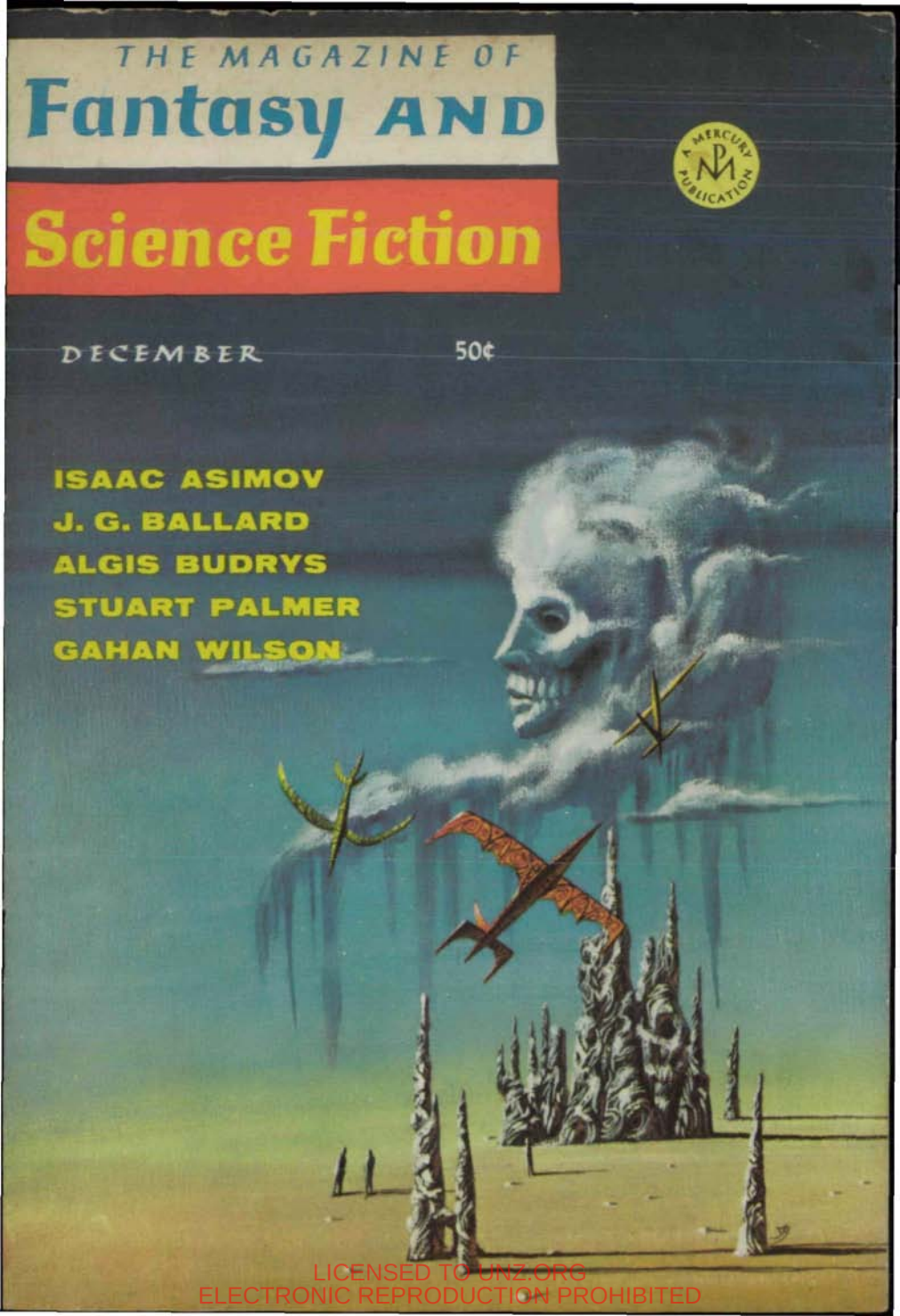

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

DECEMBER *Including Venture Science Fiction*

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David Redd is a young English writer. We do not now know much more than that about him. Such information can wait; hopefully, we will be able to offer it along with more of his work. However, we could not wait to bring you this superior and involving fantasy: "When the sun sets, all the creatures of the rocks come alive and dance, that the sun shall not rise again. We were born in darkness, and the darkness shall return."

SUNDOWN

by David Redd

PROLOGUE

Many centuries ago, human explorers came to the northern valleys in great numbers. The first expeditions were followed by shipload after shipload of colonists seeking new lives away from the overcrowded southern countries. The settlers gave new names to the land and its creatures, started farms and villages, made roads and railways, built houses and factories. Tall chimneys poured dark smoke into the sky above the bleak mountains, turning the white clouds into a dismal grey haze. Each day the short-lived humans hurried through the crowded streets of the desolation they had built around them.

A wild giant from the northern wastes was brought into the valleys and exhibited to the people by a travelling showman. This giant was called a troll, because light slowed him down and under direct sunlight he was totally paralysed. The true giants, the skin-clad barbarians of the snows, were never captured alive. The troll was the first living creature of this size ever shown to the valley humans. He was exhibited in the open air, at night. One morning after the people had departed, just before dawn, the troll was visited by a wandering poet.

"This is not your world," said the troll to the poet, as they watched a passing satellite and waited for the dawn.

The poet replied: "We are here, therefore the world is ours."

The troll: "You live in our lands without being part of them. You make your own lands around you, and you huddle together within them, refusing to face the natural world."

The poet: "We fear the dark and the unknown."

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The troll: "To you, life is light and vision. On your home planet the creatures must dwell in continuous light. Here, we live only in darkness. When the sun sets, all the creatures of the rocks come alive and dance, that the sun shall not rise again. We were born in darkness, and the darkness shall return."

The poet: "There are eyes in the deep forests, glimpsed by travellers. At night the goblins come out and light fires on the hillsides. Do they too pray for the end of day?"

The troll: "All creatures pray for the end of light. One evening the sun will go down into the mists forever."

I

The northern stars twinkled in the frost-clear air above the valley. The dryad known as the White Lady watched the fur-sprites digging into the snow. She was standing to one side, admiring the showers of snow hurled up by the fur-sprites from their excavations. She was viewing the scene in slow-time, so to her the snow appeared to rise and fall with graceful dignity. As dryads grew older they used more slow-time perception; this one was very old.

Underneath the snow was an ancient human village. It had been inhabited less than a century ago, before daylight vanished from the North Polar Continent. The fur-sprites were digging down to it in search of metal for use in their laboratory caves. Unlike the fur-sprites, the dryad had no scientific curiosity to bring her so far from her forest. She merely wanted to watch the fountains of snow gliding down in slow motion around the excavations. Below the surface layers of dry, powdery snow, several feet of ice covered the valley floor, and this too had to be removed.

After hours of work the crushed buildings were slowly uncovered. The village had been reduced to rubble after sundown, and its remains had been preserved under the ice ever since. The fur-sprites began probing some promising-looking spots, and now only a little snow and ice was being thrown onto the mounds of waste material which ringed the site. The dryad returned her perceptions to the normal time-rate and drifted over to the large shallow pits dug out by the fur-sprites. The bare rubble, with snow packed hard in the crevices between the stones, was cold and hard beneath her.

A fur-sprite padded over to her. "Lady, I have discovered metal. Will you dowse the nature and extent of the substance?"

"I will do so gladly. Lead me to your boreholes."

She followed him to the spot where he had drilled his telekinetic probes. She knew the fur-spite would not ask for her aid unless the samples were promising.

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"These are my test drillings, Lady," said the fur-sprite. "All save one contain iron-alloy."

His sample-cores were laid out on the snow beside the small cylindrical holes he had drilled. The dryad examined them, approving of their neatness, then studied the body of metal lying beneath the surface. It was larger than she had expected. The fur-sprite had found the remains of a public transport vehicle, which contained as much usable metal as six normal-sized vehicles.

"This is welcome news," said the fur-sprite. "Lady, I thank you."

The news was flashed to the other fur-sprites, several of whom had also discovered metal objects. They all ceased work and made obeisance to the North Star. It was fitting that the first whisper of the greater wind should reach them at that moment.

Two southerly winds came up the valley towards the Pole during each revolution of the star-field. The lesser wind, lasting for half an hour, corresponded to the morning in the sunlit south, and the hour-long greater wind began during the southern evening. Both winds carried with them the echoes of the lands they had passed over, and these echoes were savoured by the people of the valleys. The faint southernmost echoes served to heighten the atmosphere of bleak grandeur from the frozen sea at the valley mouths.

Standing on the ruins of the human settlement, surrounded by a circle of white snow mounds, the dryad and the fur-sprites drank in the wind, its scents and its thoughts, its emotions and its atmospheres, and its singing rushing motions. The wind caught up the dry surface snow and whirled the tiny flakes onward through the night. The dryad went into slow-time again, and the dance of the snowflakes became as majestic as the eternal movement of the stars.

The dryad gradually tasted a strange taint in their friendly wind. The fur-sprites noticed it too. Far away near the valley's southern end, some alien mind was sending out a stream of weird unhealthy images. It was like an oil slick spreading over a pure ice-cold sea. The dryad recognised the source of the thoughts, and she hastily returned to normal-time.

"Lady, what is this thing?"

The fur-sprite she had aided was standing beside her. She laid a hand on his small smooth-furred head to comfort him.

"These thoughts are coming from a human. I must learn more."

"My Lady, no!" The fur-sprite knew what she intended to do.

"Peace, I shall be in no danger. My thoughts cannot travel against the wind."

The White Lady withdrew her hand from the fur-sprite's head. She opened out her mental field to its fullest extent, straining to pick

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up the human thoughts drifting northwards on the wind. The unpleasant taint intensified to the point where it was painful to her. She also received thoughts from creatures between her and the human.

The monster was Josef Somes, a travelling bandit turned plunderer from the equatorial continents where day and night still alternated. It wore an insulated airtight suit which protected it from the Polar environment. The human had crossed the frozen sea in its metal armour, and it was now journeying up the valley in search of the valuable mineral known as living-rock. This rock fetched high prices in the southern markets, and Josef Somes had found an old pre-sundown map which gave the position of a large lode. The dryad realised she knew where the human was heading for. That great mass of living-rock was the sacred outcrop jutting out at a bend in her own valley, just below the forests where the dryads and several other races lived.

The human was sheltering from the wind, the White Lady learned. As soon as the wind died down the human would leave its refuge and continue on its northward journey. That taint in the wind was only the beginning. The monster would come right up to the sacred outcrop beside her own forest and shamelessly defile the living-rock. If it was allowed to do this unchecked it would repeat the deed, and perhaps other humans would join it. This must not be allowed to happen.

The fur-sprites had opened their minds and examined the thoughts coming to them on the wind. They had not learned as much as the White Lady, but they knew that the living-rock near their homes was threatened by a human plunderer.

"Lady, we must go south to Homeground," said the leader of the fur-sprites. "We hear the thoughts of our elders, calling all creatures to an assembly beside the living-rock."

"You are right," said the dryad. "Here we can do nothing about the menace. We must return to Homeground."

II

Homeground, on the gentle western slope of the valley, was one of the few snow-free areas in the North Polar Continent. This was due to the efforts of its inhabitants, who maintained a permanent snow-repellent spell over it. In its hundred acres, which had been landscaped into a series of terraces by the busy gardeners, were nineteen separate stands of tall fir trees. Each stand was called a forest and was the home of a single dryad. Mosses, grasses, snowdrops and other plants grew in the open spaces between the

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forests, tended by the gardeners and the sad-faced gnomes who lived in the long earthen dykes. Solitary deciduous trees, without attendant spirits, rose above the undergrowth to a height of thirty feet or more.

After three hours' journey, the dryad and the fur-sprites reached the aged oak tree on the northern edge of Homeground. Nobody was there to welcome them because the valley creatures had all gathered on the Meeting Plain, at the opposite end of Homeground. The party moved on through the area covered by the snow-repellent spell.

The dryad's hands moved swiftly in the outline of a sacred symbol as she reached the first of the nineteen forests; the dryad of this timber was absent, but her trees would remember. Inside the woods, and scattered about the open spaces, were the dwellings of the valley creatures. Dwarfs and fur-sprites shared caverns below the soil. Pine martens and tarsiers nested high up in the trees. The gardeners, elfin people related to the goblins, made tumbledown wooden huts with roofs of turf, and growing on these buildings were plants such as mosses and brittle winterferns. Long winding banks of earth sprawling haphazardly over the terraces contained low tunnels similar to rabbit warrens, and in these artificial caves lived the gnomes who often assisted the gardeners. The dryad and the fur-sprites with her saw all these dwellings as they travelled towards the Meeting Plain, and every home was empty. The fur-sprites were uneasy; they could not remember a time when Homeground had been deserted. Perhaps, the fur-sprites whispered to each other, perhaps the valley had been like this before sundown, when humans ruled the land.

In deference to the White Lady, the fur-sprites took the path through her forest and waited respectfully while she merged with her favorite tree for a brief moment. The dryad rejoined them, saying nothing, and they went down to the Meeting Plain together.

The Meeting Plain was the area of the valley floor at the foot of the living-rock bluff which formed the southern border of Homeground. Fur-sprites, dwarfs, dryads, gnomes, owls and all the other creatures of Homeground were standing, sitting or crouching around the circle of elders as the dryad and her prospector friends arrived.

The assembled creatures greeted the travellers warmly. The fur-sprites gave their news about the metal they had found, but the menace of the approaching human was foremost in their minds. The White Lady walked over to take her place with the other elders, and the conference continued.

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Now that the first wave of human-fear had died down, the people were discussing the measures to be taken against the human. All the plans involved killing the intruder, for there was no thought of merely driving the human away. The memories of the times before sundown were still strong. Every month at first moonrise, the valley creatures lit a fire of coal and wood to celebrate their deliverance from humanity, and at the yearly Midwinter bonfire which marked Highest Full Moon the wooden image of a human being was cast into the flames. So the argument about the human was not over whether it should be killed, but how it should be killed.

The people were divided into the supporters of two different strategies. The majority, favoring the "defensive" strategy, wanted to set traps for the human to walk into when it reached Homeground, and the minority wanted to go south and attack the human while it was still coming up the valley. The supporters of the "defensive" policy pointed out that their plans gave them more time to make their preparations, besides enabling them to work in Homeground. After much discussion, the elders adopted the "defensive" strategy. The people of Homeground would let the human come to them.

Before the assembly began to discuss the traps to be constructed, the White Lady made a suggestion. "Our ancient enemy was always a creature of limited powers, and it must be vulnerable in many ways. If we knew which part of its mind to strike, we would be able to direct its thought processes to suit our purposes. Perhaps we could even control its body and thus remove all risks to ourselves. However, we cannot make the necessary probes from here. Someone must go near our enemy and probe its mind to discover its weakness."

"If the human is indeed vulnerable, its death will be an easy matter for us," said a dwarf. "The spellmasters control powerful forces which we can use in the assault on the monster when it reaches Homeground. But who can discover its weaknesses for the spellmasters? Who can venture that close to the human and survive?"

"I shall go," said the dryad. Ignoring the response from the startled creatures around her, she went on, "With my years of experience and my knowledge of the mental sciences, I would surely learn more than the average person would learn from a probe of the human. You cannot send any other but me."

The fur-sprites, who had a special affection for the White Lady, were shocked and dismayed. "Lady, it is not right that you should risk your life in this way. Let some other go in your place."

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"You cannot send any other but me," she said again.

They tried to dissuade her, but failed, and they realised that she was determined to go. The fur-sprites made a last attempt to ensure the safety of their White Lady.

"Do not go alone, Lady. Let others accompany you, to protect you. Any information you gain will be useless if you die without sending it to the spellmasters."

"I agree with the fur-sprites," said the oreade. "I shall go with you, White Lady. If you die alone your sacrifice is in vain."

The oreade was an old mountain-spirit who had made her home in the valley. If she said she would go with the dryad, nothing would stop her.

So the dryad submitted to the will of the creatures who loved her, and took four companions with her. The oreade came, and two fur-sprites, and a mournful gnome who bore an axe of human steel. The White Lady bowed formally to them, and raised her hands to the sky hanging dark and cold above the valley. "We have no favorable stars for our quest, my friends. There is no moon, and only one satellite that is passing through an evil constellation."

"The more reason for us to aid and protect you, Lady," said one of the fur-sprites.

"As you wish it, so be it," said the dryad. "Let us depart."

III

As they set out, a beacon glowed with white fire on top of the living-rock bluff. A spellmaster was throwing magnesium powder onto the coals as a good-omen offering for the travellers.

The White Lady and her companions would meet the human—and have time to probe it—well before the lesser wind started; so they could send their messages to the spellmasters by letting their thoughts drift up to Homeground on the lesser wind. The valley creatures were accustomed to long journeys because they sometimes made purposeless safaris far away from Homeground, out onto the Polar plateau where simian giants far larger than humans roamed through the night. This march to meet and probe Josef Somes was a relatively minor affair.

Travelling so closely together, they could not help overhearing stray thoughts from each other, despite their rigid mental control. The dryad gradually absorbed the basic personalities of her companions—the unemotional maternalism of the oreade; the earnest passions of Jaerem and Moera, the two fur-sprites; and the comforting stolid strength of the gnome. Before an hour had passed she knew them as well as she knew her closest friends. This intimacy was a feature of all journeys made by a small number of people.

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Slightly later than anticipated, the five travellers came within telepathic range of the human. It was walking steadily northwards up the valley, and it would soon reach their present position. The dryad pictured the human plodding onwards, encased in its metal suit, the lamp on its helmet sending a beam of yellow light onto the snow ahead. She marvelled at the strength of the ambition which had brought the plunderer so far from its home in the sunlit lands of the south.

Here the valley walls were tall and steep, and curved round sharply to the left, skirting a small hill of extremely hard rock. Normally this hill was inhabited by seven oreades, but they had all fled to Homeground during the greater wind. The site was perfect for the White Lady's purpose.

"We shall await the human here," said the dryad. "I shall remain here in the centre of the valley floor, but you four had better conceal yourselves at the sides—Jaerem and Moera to my left, and the others to my right. The human is moving from side to side, checking the entire valley in case the position of the living-rock is given incorrectly on its map, so I have a higher probability of meeting it here in the centre than anywhere else. You four will be safer at the sides."

While her companions moved out across the snow to their positions on either side of the valley, the dryad remained standing like a tall exquisitely sculptured column of ice. She was cautiously tasting the thoughts of the approaching human, accustoming herself to the human's overall psychological pattern in preparation for her coming task.

The others burrowed into the snow, covering themselves by using light camouflage spells which spread the snow thinly above them. The human would never notice them, being dependent on sight for perception of its surroundings.

The White Lady finished sampling the human's thoughts. She swiftly followed the example of her friends and dug herself a hole in the snow. When the hole was deep enough, she slid inside and cleared away the disturbed snow with a camouflage spell. Now the valley appeared empty of life to the human eye.

A small patch of yellow light moved out from behind the curving cliff of the hill. The pale glow was followed by a dark shadowy mass that was Josef Somes. The human was over a foot taller than the dryad, and it was far thicker in proportion. Its dull brown atmosphere suit still bore a few flakes of its original orange paint. The dryad was receiving all the human's thoughts, uninterrupted now by any inter-

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vening substance. With a shock she realised that the monster's mind was almost empty of surface mental processes. Below the shallow layers of surface thought its mind was a dreadful thing. The finding of the living-rock was equated with the concepts of wealth, sexual achievements, social power and status. Ignorance rather than ambition had brought the human here. It did not understand the forces within it, and it believed that possession of the living-rock would satisfy its needs and somehow atone for the wasted years of its past life. Yet despite this lack of self-awareness, the human could react quickly when faced with a problem—

The dryad ceased her examination of the human's hidden thoughts before they distracted her further. She should not be wasting time. She should be testing the human's mental defences, not exploring its vile memories.

The White Lady went into slow-time, speeding up her actions by a factor of four. To her it seemed as though the human was lifting its feet and putting them down in slow motion. The human was just coming within suitable range, and she had three minutes of subjective time to do her work, although some of this could not be used because the human's responses would be in normal-time and appear to reach her only after a long delay.

She sent out a multilevel blanket probe, expecting to detect resonance echoes from the brain areas in which Josef Somes was sensitive to her mental impulses.

The human plodded onwards; its wavering, almost-straight path would take it within a foot or two of the concealed dryad. She watched it advance for several precious seconds, waiting for the telepathic echoes, before she realised they would not come. Josef Somes had not detected the probe.

Alarmed, she sent out a series of fierce beams of thought in rapid succession, aiming them directly at the sensory centres in that primitive undeveloped brain. This was no longer a probing but a full attack. Her power was so intense that she triggered involuntary reception-responses in the minds of her companions, yet her attack did not affect the human at all. She tried every way she knew to reach its mind, and all her efforts failed. The human's defences had no vulnerable points; there were no defences; there was nothing to defend.

Then, in that moment of failure, she saw that the human would walk directly over her refuge. Even in slow-time, with her reactions four times as fast as normal, there was nothing she could do.

The human's right foot descended on the thin layer of snow held above her hole by sorcery.

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The White Lady, crouching low, saw a dark metal boot burst through her fragile snow ceiling. Snowflakes showered upon her. Miraculously the boot swung aside, leaving a round patch of black sky where the snow had been. Josef Somes, accustomed to crevasses, had thrown itself sideways onto a more solid surface. It rose clumsily to its feet and inclined its head towards the hole, bringing the light from its helmet lamp to illuminate the opening.

While the human was picking itself up after its fall, the dryad cast a new camouflage spell which made her appear to be a small drift of snow. The human knew that strong winds blew up the valley, and it would see nothing strange in snow piled in a crevasse.

Josef Somes peered into her hole. The human saw a shallow depression containing drifts of loose snow—the spell had worked perfectly. Automatically the human reached out with the long wooden pole it carried, intending to test the surface before it. Its mind bore a clear image of the pole thrusting into the loose snow until it touched solid ice. The wooden shaft would go right through the dryad's frail body.

She heard telepathic cries from the fur-sprites, and simultaneously two balls of snow came hurtling towards the human. One snowball smacked against the suit's chest casing. Josef Somes jerked back its pole from the dryad's hole, swinging round to see where the missile had come from. The fur-sprites threw more snowballs at the human. They were standing above ground, and Joseph Somes could see them as brown shadows against the white background.

Forgetting the supposed crevasse, the human moved towards the fur-sprites. Its thoughts were puzzled. As it advanced, the fur-sprites called out: "Lady, save yourself while the monster is occupied with us!"

The fur-sprites were making no effort to hide themselves. The White Lady, loving them and hating them at the same time, knew they would not escape. The human was drawing a gun from its belt, with the casual bloodlust of all humans.

She thought of a way to aid them. She cast a new camouflage spell over the human's helmet, smearing the face-plate with snow. Josef Somes wiped the face-plate clean with an impatient wave of its hand, breaking the spell. The dryad tried again, and a second time the human brushed the snow aside, thinking a snowball was responsible. Her magic was useless. Only then did she heed the fur-sprites' pleas and leave her refuge. She scurried silently across the snow to join the oreade and the

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gnome on the other side of the valley. As the dryad ran she obliterated her light footprints with a swift series of spells. Reaching her friends, she threw herself down on the snow and assumed the form of a small snowdrift. The human would not see her here, even if it turned its attention away from the fur-sprites.

Abandoning their position, Jaerem and Moera fled in opposite directions, giving the human two separate targets. Seeing the creatures split up, Josef Somes experienced no indecision, merely aiming for the nearest. It fired twice at Jaerem, killing him with the first shot.

The dryad felt him die, sharing the pain and the sudden shock, helplessly seeing the bright clear thoughts cloud over and disappear. She was still in slow-time, and had four times longer than normal to watch the death.

Moera felt the death of Jaerem and knew that his time too was over; he sensed the human was swinging round to bring the gun barrel towards him. To the hidden watchers he thought briefly "Goodbye, White Lady, oreade, gnome, I shall see you from the North Star." His will faltered, and the dryad heard his regrets, his anguish and his fear in his last moment. It was over in an instant.

The two animals would be good eating, thought the human. It picked up the bodies, examined them curiously and thrust them into its pack.

"It will *eat* them!" cried the White Lady. "Is it not enough that they died?"

Unhearing, the human continued on its way up the valley, towards the living-rock at Homeground.

"They died for me," said the dryad, in normal-time again. It was not a coherent thought but a single cold pulse of emotion, sorrow and shame fused together. The oreade and the gnome reached out to steady her mind, and by disregarding personal proprieties they succeeded in calming her. Normally they would never have been able to manipulate her emotions, but she had been temporarily unstabilised by the two violent deaths she had witnessed.

"Vengeance," said the dryad to the others. It was a mental picture of Josef Somes dying. Killing the human would partially atone for her folly in causing the fur-sprites' deaths, although no act of vengeance could alter the past.

"The best service we can perform in their memory is the killing of their murderer," said the gnome.

"We must recover their bodies," said the dryad. They could not let the human eat the fur-sprites. "That comes above my own life, after I have sent my report to Homeground."

Her statement was painfully honest, but she no longer cared

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about shielding her private thoughts. Besides, her two companions must have had to scan her entire personality to calm her, and this was the customary preliminary when a person was near death.

A cold breath sighed around them. The lesser wind was beginning, rising suddenly in a flurry of snowflakes. Away at Homeground, the listeners were waiting to receive the White Lady's information. The wind would carry her thoughts well beyond the normal half-mile limiting range of telepathy.

"The human's mind cannot be influenced in any normal way," said the dryad, after describing her encounter with it and the fur-sprites' deaths. "No mental attack can possibly succeed; physical methods must be employed. Spells are only useful if the human cannot use its strength to break them." She suggested a few spells, such as increasing the decay-rate of its metal armour. "Jaerem and Moera used projectiles against the human. The best method of attack appears to be the use of hard, fast-moving projectiles to pierce the human's atmosphere suit."

She continued until she had sent out all her information. She repeated her message several times, in case the listeners at Homeground missed a part of it. The slackening of the lesser wind brought an end to the work.

The human had been sheltering from the snow during the wind, watched by the gnome. Soon it would start moving again.

"That ends our mission," said the White Lady. "The people of Homeground must do what they can in the few hours they have left."

"Lady! The human has decided to prepare a meal!" called the gnome.

All three of them listened to the human's thoughts. Josef Somes was going to take off its pack and pull out a block of meat-cubes. It would not eat the animals yet. The White Lady saw her chance to recover the fur-sprites' bodies.

"Move up behind the human," she said, and they hurried forward. She went on, "It has placed its pack on the ground and is about to unfasten the straps. I will dance in front of it and distract it. While it is watching me you will remove Jaerem and Moera from the pack and conceal yourselves. Do you approve of this plan?"

They agreed to follow her instructions. Neither of them asked what the White Lady would do after attracting the human's attention.

Josef Somes saw a slight movement at the outer limits of its visibility. Reading the human's thoughts, the White Lady showed herself in the light again for a moment before hopping away. Josef Somes was suspicious. A humanoid-female form in this territory

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could hardly be a woman. The White Lady let herself be seen once more, intending to dart out of view after a couple of seconds. In the human's mind were remembered rumours of spirits, hags and other northern terrors real and imaginary. It thought, "If that woman-thing keeps on jumping back and forth I'll shoot the bloody thing and have done with it."

She knew so little about human psychology. The dryad revised her plans and stood still, letting Josef Somes look at her. She was not unpleasing to the human eye, despite her age. Behind the human, the oreade and the gnome crept forward. If it turned round it would see them.

Her lack of movement reassured the human—she wished she knew why. It took a step towards her, its helmet lamp like a single yellow eye on its forehead. She shifted her head slightly, simulating fear, and stepped back. Her enemy came forward again, and she retreated further. The bulky pack, straps undone, lay forgotten on the snow behind the human.

She led Josef Somes onwards, a pace at a time. Her thoughts were with the oreade and the gnome as they gently extracted two still, furry forms from the open pack. The gnome bore the bodies away in the white sack he always carried for his own shroud, and the oreade blotted out their footprints with spells which restored the disturbed snow to its former smooth surface. That was one part of her debt to the fur-sprites repaid, the dryad thought. She heard the oreade calling to her: "We are safe, and we have their bodies. Now we are concerned for you." The gnome added, "Do not be misled by false emotions, White Lady. Have no thought of sacrificing yourself for the memory of Jaerem and Moera. Your life is still precious to us all."

The human was still coming forward as she backed away from it. She replied to her friends, "Whether I live or die depends on the human. Whatever happens, I shall accept the result."

She stopped retreating and stood facing Josef Somes. As the human pounced on her, its mind burning with half-understood desires, she leaped away from it. She landed outside the torchlight and ran for the high snowfields of the valley wall. The human's old fears returned. The beam of light caught her, and the human drew its gun. Josef Somes was not thinking, merely following an automatic sequence of concepts which went: "Northern creatures are dangerous; this is a northern creature; I must kill it to save myself from any possible danger."

With the gun in its hand, the human recalled that it had killed two valley animals and put them in its pack; this reminded it that its pack was lying on the snow somewhere behind it. The dryad

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noticed the human's anxiety about its pack. She took advantage of its momentary hesitation to begin flinging up clouds of loose snow to hide her movements. A curtain of snow rose into the air between her and the human. Realising it would never catch her, Josef Somes fired twice at random and then abandoned the chase.

Reaching the pack, the human checked its contents and discovered that the two dead animals were missing. It cursed violently, sending ripples of pain through the three listeners. From now on, it swore to itself, it would be on the lookout for these valley creatures, and it would shoot on sight. Josef paused at this point in its thoughts. The ghost-woman had not attacked it—in fact, she had fled when it approached her—and the two dead animals had been stolen by trickery. These animals were no match for a human, and they knew it, Josef Somes told itself. The old stories about night-monsters attacking humans must be pure fiction. Reassured by these thoughts, Josef Somes resumed its journey towards the living-rock.

IV

"We can travel faster than the human, but we cannot get past it," said the White Lady. "If we caught up with it, it would kill us. And our arrival before the human might set off the defences of Homeground, if the spellmasters have laid any traps across the valley."

"Let us follow the monster," said the gnome. "We shall see how our people at Homeground deal with it."

The gnome wanted to see the human die. So did the dryad and the oreade. The ancestral hatred of humanity was still with them, made stronger by the killing of the fur-sprites. The three companions set out on their journey back to Homeground, walking a safe distance behind the human. As they travelled they counted the hours to the death of Josef Somes.

When they were less than fifteen minutes from Homeground, they sensed something moving on the horizon a little way behind them. It was a huge troll, twelve feet tall, walking steadily along the cliff-top path above the steep eastern valley wall. They halted, letting Josef Somes draw further ahead of them, and as they stopped, the troll came within telepathic range.

The oreade acted as their spokesman, because she was a mountain-spirit and therefore related to the troll. She told him what had happened to them, and he told her that he too was following the human. The troll had been a prisoner of the humans before sundown, and had been forced to exhibit himself in a travelling circus. He had learned about the human Josef Somes from a frightened glacier-naiad near the

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southern end of the valley. Now he was hoping to catch up with the human and destroy it. Trolls had long memories to match their long lives.

"Our friends will welcome you at Homeground," said the oreade. "I only wish you had seen us at a happier time. My two companions and I will gladly walk along the cliff-path to Homeground with you."

"Lady, I am honoured by your presence and the presence of your companions," said the troll, using thought-forms similar to those of the fur-sprites. "Do not trouble yourselves to climb the valley wall; I shall come down to you and walk your way."

"You are kind, friend troll," said the oreade. The three companions waited while the troll came sliding down the snow-covered cliff to join them.

The troll bowed to each of them in turn. On greeting the gnome, he said "Friend Corpsebearer, may I see the bodies of your companions who were slain by the human?"

The gnome agreed, and from his white linen sack he produced the two small bodies and laid them gently on the snow. The troll knelt beside them and with his huge clumsy hands he made the sign of the North Star over their heads. He watched silently as the gnome returned the dead fur-sprites to the sack.

"We must move on," said the White Lady. "The human is within sight of Homeground."

She was listening to the human's thoughts, and had just learned that it was looking at the beacon fire on top of the living-rock bluff. The old map the human was using stated that the bluff was the site of a witches' beacon.

"You are correct, Lady," said the troll. "The human has realised it is near its goal."

They moved on, hurrying to make up the time lost in meeting the troll. They had taken perhaps twenty paces when they heard a deep rumbling sound and felt intense vibrations in the ground beneath them. Their other senses gave a clearer picture: a large section of the valley wall ahead of them was collapsing on Josef Somes. The White Lady saw the snow and ice crashing down on the unprepared human, and she shared its thoughts as the avalanche descended upon it.

"That was done by our people," said the oreade. "They dislodged the ice to trap the human. None of the rocks gave way."

Ice was still falling as the oreade spoke. The dryad watched the debris spread out over the valley floor and waited for the human's thoughts to cease. She knew of no life form that could survive an avalanche.

But the human was uninjured, although it was buried under many tons of snow and ice. Its metal at-

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mosphere suit had protected it.

Hearing the sound of the avalanche, the human had reacted by reaching for its gun, thinking the noise was the roar of some dangerous animal. It was buried with its gun in its hand. Finding itself covered by a thick layer of debris, the human adjusted its gun to the burning-flame setting and started melting its way out.

"It has accepted the situation and believes the avalanche to be a natural occurrence," said the oreade. "It does not suspect that it is being attacked. The almost trouble-free journey from the south has convinced it that the stories of Polar spirits and demons are exaggerations of the truth. Its encounter with you has encouraged it, White Lady."

"It is melting through the ice very rapidly," said the gnome.

"Let us go nearer," said the troll. "Camouflage spells will protect us."

"It welcomes the opportunity of using its gun," said the oreade, who was intrigued by the complexity displayed by the human's thoughts at this moment. "The fur-sprites were its first targets since it entered the permanent night. Everything else sensed its presence and kept well away from it."

"Except us," said the dryad.

In its icy prison somewhere beneath the snow, Josef Somes was melting a way to freedom. It was nearly at the surface when its gun short-circuited. Steam from the melted ice had penetrated the gun's battered casing. The human cursed several times and pulled out a knife. It cut through the remaining snow in seconds, forming a hole large enough to squeeze through. The White Lady and her friends, having come nearer while Josef Somes was busy, quickly disguised themselves as mounds of snow.

Josef Somes crawled through the hole it had made into the open. The watchers saw the now familiar yellow light from its helmet lamp sweep across the valley as the human surveyed the area.

"The human is remarkably calm for a creature which has just escaped being crushed to death or buried alive," said the oreade.

"It is an unusually practical member of its race," said the troll. "It belongs to a type of human which, when faced with a problem, will study and tackle the problem without any emotional interference."

"That is very interesting," said the oreade. "What society could drive a person of this type to embark on a quest into the so-called Haunted Continent? I would like to explore its thoughts much further."

"Listen to its thoughts now," said the White Lady.

The human sat on a block of ice, checking its equipment to see what damage the avalanche had done. It had lost its wooden pole.

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Its pack had been torn and crushed, and some instruments inside had been wrecked. The ice had almost penetrated the atmosphere suit in three places. The listening valley creatures carefully noted the three sections of weakened casing —now that the avalanche had failed, another attack would have to be made. Finally, the human's gun had been damaged, and it could not be repaired. Josef Somes tossed the useless weapon into the hole it had made in the ice.

Getting up off the block of ice, the human started walking towards the living-rock again. The White Lady was surprised by its single-mindedness. "It is continuing with its quest already!"

"Its objective, the living-rock, is in sight," said the gnome. He had no difficulty in understanding the human's actions.

They moved on, following the human. Coming into telepathic range of Homeground, they spoke with the elders and spellmasters of the community.

"I have journeyed up from the frozen shores of the Polar Sea to kill this human," said the troll. "Will you allow me to do this thing?"

"We have oxy-acetylene equipment ready to cut through the human's metal armour," the elders replied. "The avalanche was not our only weapon. White Lady, the choice is yours. Do you wish to take personal vengeance on the human for the deaths of Jaerem and Moera?"

The dryad remembered the fur-sprites as she had last seen them— lying still on the snow, with the troll kneeling before their bodies. She answered, "We four shall go forward and put the human to death."

So it was decided, and the people of Homeground made no further attack on the human. The killing of Josef Somes was left to the White Lady and her three companions.

V

Josef Somes came up to the bluff, looking from side to side for traces of the creatures which must have lit the beacon. Seeing nothing to alarm it, and thinking the creatures had fled, the human began to examine the tall granite-like columns of living-rock. Under the yellow light from the human's lamp, the living-rock seemed no different from the stone it so closely resembled.

The human took out an ultra-violet torch, which had survived the avalanche, and played its beam on the rock. Wherever the invisible light touched, the living-rock gave out a cold blue glow. This was the effect which made the living-rock so valuable, because the blue luminescence took five years to fade.

Having proved that this substance was living-rock, the human

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put away its ultra-violet torch. Its thoughts puzzled the oreade, who had expected a period of deep emotion when Josef Somes located the living-rock. The human merely thought "About time, too!" with a peculiar grudging satisfaction.

"Humans are ungrateful creatures," said the troll. "This one believes that the living-rock belongs to it, because nobody else has taken it. It has a vague notion that it has earned a right to the living-rock by travelling all this way."

Unaware that four supernatural beings were advancing towards it, Josef Somes prepared to chip out some living-rock with its hammer and chisel. The haft of the hammer was broken, but it was usable.

"Do not touch the living-rock, human!" shouted the troll, using the ugly sound-forms of the human language. "Put down your chisel!"

The human turned round, still holding its tools. It saw the troll and the three smaller creatures standing in line on the snow. At last its mind contained strong emotions: fear and horror. "My God, there are monsters here after all. That's a giant; it can't be anything else. I wish I had my gun now."

They had made their plans while they approached the human. They attacked in unison with adapted camouflage spells. Snow whirled up from the ground and plastered itself against the transparent face-plate of the atmosphere suit, cutting off the human's vision. Josef Somes tried to brush the snow away with its hands, but the spells were too strong to be broken this time. The human was blinded.

The gnome swung his axe at the human's helmet, aiming for the lamp set in the forehead. The steel blade shattered the glass disc and touched the glowing wires inside. A blue spark flashed onto the metal; the gnome was thrown back by the electric shock. The light went out. No longer needed, the snow fell away from the human's faceplate. Josef Somes looked out into darkness, and the darkness was peopled with monsters.

The troll was tremendously strong—he had to be, to carry the weight of his own body. He picked up the human and tossed it back to the ground as if it weighed no more than a bundle of twigs. The human landed awkwardly, bruising its shoulder. It was screaming at the troll, cursing him and pleading with him. The troll fell to his knees and bent over the frightened human. He prodded at the weakened sections of the atmosphere suit, trying to force the metal plates apart. To the human, the troll's probing felt like the blows of a mechanical hammer.

The human could see a huge dark shape against the stars overhead, and knew the giant creature was doing the pounding on its armour. It longed for its gun, and other less clear thoughts darted through its mind. The old fear of

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the supernatural, which the human had not known since childhood, had returned in full force.

"I cannot get through this metal armour," said the troll, standing up. "Friend Corpsebearer, can you smash the face-plate?"

"I can try," said the gnome, and lifted up the axe.

The human did not see the gnome move, but it knew the troll was no longer bending over it. Scrambling to its feet, the human dashed off to the side. Its eyes were adapting to the darkness and it could just see the valley wall ahead.

Reacting instantly, the White Lady raced after the fugitive. The troll took four mighty strides, overtook them both and caught the fleeing human around its waist. The White Lady marvelled at the troll's speed.

The gnome came running up to them, followed closely by the oreade. The troll pinned the struggling human to the snow, face upwards for the gnome to strike.

"Move your arm away from its head, in case my axe bounces off at the wrong angle," said the gnome to the troll. "That is better. I hope the human does not move suddenly."

His blade swung down into the human's face-plate, smashing the transparent front and striking the soft head inside the helmet. Blood dripped from the axe as he withdrew it.

"The axe inflicted a deep cut across its nose and cheek," said the troll. "You opened the face-plate without seriously wounding the human."

"I could not do otherwise," said the gnome. "My blade could not go down any further because the opening is too small."

The gnome could only cut through the glass, not through the metal around it. The troll asked, "Do you wish to imprison the human and wait for it to die?"

"No," said the oreade. "We must kill it now."

She held out the hammer and chisel dropped by the human. The troll glanced at them, and asked, "White Lady, do you desire to kill the human yourself?"

"I do," said the dryad.

The troll was holding the human down for her. She took the tools from the oreade and knelt by the human's head. Josef Somes was coughing and blowing little bubbles in the blood flowing from its nose. The White Lady disliked suffering, and she was glad that Josef Somes would die quickly. It was a human, but it could feel pain like any other creature.

She placed the chisel point in the human's left eye socket, piercing the eyeball, and held the tool steady. The human tried to bring its hands up to its tortured head, but the troll restrained it. Blood streamed over the human's face, and its thoughts were sickening. The White Lady sighed. Feeling

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the weight of her age, and wishing the whole affair was over, the dryad brought the hammer down. The chisel went straight into the human's brain.

"I am old," said the White Lady. "I felt pity for the human as I killed it."

"I understand you," said the troll. "They are weak creatures without their aids, and they have ambitions beyond their natural powers. But do not pity the human, for your friends must be buried, and your sorrow will be more fitting at the fur-sprites' funeral."

The White Lady said nothing, remembering the dying thoughts of the human—thoughts that would haunt her forever.

"You did what had to be done," said the troll. "Look, the people of Homeground are coming to greet you."

"I see them," said the White Lady. "Well, it is over. Let us go to meet them."

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Those of you who have ever been tempted to try out any of the currently fashionable means of chemical stimulation had better pause first and consider this fair (though admittedly not entirely serious) warning about a side-effect to end all side-effects.

THE SAGA OF DMM

by Larry Eisenberg

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF DUCKworth's discovery caused hardly more than a raised eyebrow in the scientific community. Even Duckworth underestimated what he had done.

"It's not much," he said to me, apologetically. "I was working with this long macromolecule and suddenly it split into a double helix. But any kid with a home chemistry set could duplicate my results in an hour."

"What are its properties?" I said.

"It's the most delicious substance in the world. The taste is exquisite, delicate in flavor yet vibrant, subtle yet so overpowering that whoever eats it is hooked for life."

"Incredible," I said. "Then I take it you've tasted the stuff yourself?"

"No," said Duckworth. "You see it has 100,000 calories to the ounce. That's fifty times what an average man eats in a day. Pembroke, my lab assistant, ate about a tenth of an ounce. His gall bladder almost disintegrated."

"No wonder," I said. "It's the richest food in the world."

And there the matter rested. Or so we all thought. But then someone discovered that DMM (short for Duckworth's Macro Molecule) was also an aphrodisiac. A Sunday supplement ran a lurid article on the properties of DMM, and tons of letters began to pour in on poor Duckworth. Hundreds of people came in person to his laboratory; the congestion was terrible. It made work impossible.

I ran into Duckworth just outside the University or, at least, it seemed to me that it was Duckworth. A long black beard covered his tiny, receding chin, but the great beak-like nose still jutted out

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proudly. I grabbed at his sleeve as he went by.

"Don't stop me," he said quickly. "I've got to get away. They've made my life a howling lunacy."

"But where will you go?" I said.

"I've received an offer of refuge from the Nazir of Waddam, an obscure but wealthy potentate in the Middle East who worships science. He wants me to set up a chemistry department in his new University."

I silently pressed his hand and watched him scurry into a cab. I was not to see Duckworth again for many months. But the crowds still seemed to surround his old laboratory building. Signs, some crudely scrawled in crayon, others neatly lettered in poster paint, blossomed like spring flowers. They were carried by hippies and by middle class types, too. The most popular message was

"DMM Beats Pot."

And then it happened. Duckworth himself had indicated that a home chemistry set was all one needed. Somebody caught on to that fact, and DMM began to pour out of high school and college chem labs. Even the faculties joined in. The campuses became a sanctuary of happy, entwined, grotesquely ballooning bodies.

The housewives succumbed next. When the sale of diet products plunged disastrously, delegations of angry manufacturers descended on Congress. Smiling but enormously fat Congressmen were unable to rise to greet them. Even the President lost interest in pursuing a war which, only weeks earlier, he had considered to be a matter of life and death.

The Soviet Union tried to quarantine this horror, but somehow DMM slipped through. Almost over night, the collectives and State Farms were immobilized, and, as in America, factories became ghost buildings filled with rusting machines.

The Chinese held out somewhat longer. But when Mao, unable to control his curiosity, took a tiny taste, they were undone. The posters denouncing DMM as revisionist are still on the city walls. But the colors are faded, the lettering is cracked, and the paper peels badly.

Only one country remained untouched: the tiny nation the United States had all but bombed into the Stone Age did not have even the most common of refined chemicals. Thin and on the edge of perpetual hunger, they drove the occupying troops, sated and monstrously bloated, into the sea.

I was lying down on my divan, languidly caressing the spherical belly of my mistress, one day, when the angular frame of Duckworth materialized right before me. I beamed at him.

"How is the Nazir?" I said.

Duckworth snorted.

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"A fraud like all the rest. He tricked me into coming solely for the aphrodisiac powers of DMM. He had no university. Only the biggest harem in the world."

"Duckworth," I said. "You're a fool. You should have stayed there and eaten all the DMM you could make. You were right, you know. It is the greatest stuff in the world."

"No," said Duckworth. "You see, I've continued my research into the properties of DMM, even with the meager facilities furnished by the Nazir."

"Does it do anything else?" I said. I really wasn't *that* interested, but I thought I ought to be polite.

Duckworth leaned forward and I saw the great nose looming over me like a fleshy sword of Damocles.

"DMM is inherently unstable stuff. As I told you long ago, the macromolecule splits into a double helix. In a sufficiently long period, say a year or two after digestion, the helix itself breaks down once again into an even more unstable compound, not unlike nitroglycerin in its properties."

I looked up at him, unbelieving, and slowly withdrew my hand from my mistress.

"Are you implying that we will all become living bombs?" I cried.

"Are," said Duckworth solemnly. "*Are.* And in six months or so, even the slightest movement will set you off like an enormous firecracker. Personally, I'm headed for the tallest peak of the Himalayas."

I didn't really believe Duckworth. He was always a bluenosed moralist, and I felt he was simply trying to frighten me. Nevertheless, I did send a message to the head of the University. He in turn, without believing a word of what I said, notified the State and Federal authorities. Someone was impressed because a directive was issued, recommending that we move about as little as possible, even to the extent of remaining celibate. But when the following spring came, along with a windborne burst of ragweed pollen grains, somebody sneezed.

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BOOKS

IN AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS BIG new (wide-screen-spectacular) anthology, DANGEROUS VISIONS,* Harlan Ellison takes pains to point out that *his* New Thing is not the same as Michael Moorcock's (editor of the British *New Worlds*), or my own. He is absolutely right. I hereby relinquish, cheerfully, all claim to the dubious title: I have enough trouble with the old confusions about "science fiction" without acquiring a new label, already splintered.

I am a trifle more reluctant to hand over my own abbreviative tag of last month's column, but in all fairness I concede that the associative connotations of *TNT* are far more suitable to Ellison's taste *and* image than to mine: surely he is s-f's most explosive popcorn package and snapcrackling firebrand; and from the evidence of this book, *his* New Thing is characterized specifically by pyrotechnic style and shock content.

DANGEROUS VISIONS was originally advertised to the authors invited to contribute as a collection of "unpublishable" stories—that is, stories either unsold or unwritten specifically because of "taboo" themes or unconventional treatments that made them unpalatable to the existing markets.

The idea for such a volume had been in Ellison's mind for some time; I was myself involved, several years ago, in a painfully abortive effort to do a similar collection. (I was to be the anthologist; Ellison was editor at a publishing house far better forgotten.) The only useful outcome of that venture, I felt, was my discovery that there is no such thing as a (good) unpublishable story today. There are non-commercial stories which will go only to low-paid or unpaid markets, and there are highly specialized themes which will be bought only by appropriately specialized publications; but the only (good) story that approaches unpublishability is the oddity whose treatment is at variance with its themes, and even these *eventually* find homes. (Virtually every story on the list for that earlier volume has now been published: for instance, Stur-

*DANGEROUS VISIONS, edited by Harlan Ellison; Doubleday 1967; 552 pp.; $6.95

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geon's "Noon Gun," a glowingly romantic narrative of a young man's love—not lust, went finally to *Playboy;* and Leiber's "Snow White," a sympathetic-viewpoint story about a necrophiliac, appeared recently in a publication called *Taboo.*)

Presumably, Ellison made the same discovery I did, because the emphasis in his introduction to the completed anthology is much more on his concept of The New Thing than on the Dangerous Visions idea. And certainly the large majority of the inclusions would seem quite in place, for instance, in the pages of this magazine. (I would estimate that there are less than a half-dozen, out of thirty-three, which *might* have had to go outside the range of American s-f magazines for publication: probably the Emshwiller, Bunch, and Sladek stories; possibly Delany's, Ballard's, and Spinrad's. But every one of these would have found a home either in the literary reviews or in England—and half of the rest could have gone to popular general fiction magazines as well.) It is not that the book is lacking in literally Dangerous Visions, but that (with one exception—well, perhaps two—) they are dangerously familiar as well: incest, atom doom, the death of God; brainwashing and personality absorption, the mechanization and/or institutionalization of humanity, overpopulation; automotive suicide and some varieties of cannibalism considered as popular sports: they are all quite horribly familiar themes in or out of s-f—or your daily newspaper.

(But your paper has not yet reported on the theme set forth in Samuel Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah . . .", and I am sure it has done little more than hint at the eventuality discussed in Philip Dick's "The Faith of Our Fathers." Neither have your regular science fiction magazines. For which reasons, I shall certainly reveal neither one here.)

The Dangerous Vision has become a commonplace of our society; the forecasting of such visions is one of the chief roles science fiction has played in the past twenty or thirty years. Yet this book, which began as a direct request to presumably stifled authors to voice their most terrifying, shocking, or extreme viewpoints, is (with two —well, perhaps three—exceptions) most effective in those stories which concentrate on literary values and technical excellence, rather than idea content.

(Carol Emshwiller's female-viewpoint examination of the ambiguities of "Sex and/or Mr. Morrison" may disturb some readers—but where are the extrapolations and projections of legalized homosexuality and abortion? female sexuality in the era of the Pill and antibiotics? rioting and assassination as political-action patterns in

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the U.S.? the cumulative effects of widespread use of various drugs? the possible worlds of Black Power and/or Flower Power? The Rand Corporation, and your daily newspaper, both make predictions freely . . .)

What it all goes to prove, presumably, is that the established s-f writer can write much better than he usually does, and will—given a half-reasonable rate of pay, and (apparently) unlimited stylistic freedom: also that very few are inclined toward innovative or experimental techniques, since all but a handful (whose presence establishes the parenthetical *apparently* above) elected to put their best literary feet forward in a decidedly conventional style. What it proves about the writers' thematic interests is less certain when one considers the nature of some of the work published elsewhere by authors whose contributions here are notably non-violent intellectually (Aldiss, Ballard, Brunner, Bunch . . .)—or the names missing from Ellison's list of authors invited-but-not-included (*not* mentioned and not present: Vonnegut, Disch, Dahl, Gary, Borges, Jacobs, Heinlein, Burroughs, and add your own—one way or another—controversial names). The thematic content of the final selections bears a fair resemblance to the themes most clearly recurrent in Ellison's own work.

The whole book, in further fact, is rather more like an Ellison collection in which other authors are quoted at length, than like an anthology in the usual sense. (There is some justification for this, inasmuch as the editor is also in small part the publisher: that is as he explains in one of his introductions—Ellison not only took no editorial share of the publishers' advance for this book, but added considerably to the funds provided in order to produce a book of this size with better-than-average payment for the authors included.) Even more than the editorial selections, the extensive and often painfully personal and detailed introductions confirm the evidence of Ellison's earlier collections of his own work: as writer and editor, he is a man of vision, boldness, determination, generous loyalty, intense sensitivity, strong beliefs, unbelievable egocentricity, and very nearly complete lack of taste.

With any reasonable exercise of editorial judgement, one standard-length anthology could have been selected from this giant, to match and perhaps surpass any previous collections of imaginative fiction. As it stands, the total wordage breaks down into four roughly equivalent portions: one quarter is composed of twelve titles ranging from good to superb; one quarter consists of four stories of remarkable, but flawed, quality—each or

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any of which should have been susceptible to marked improvement with discerning criticism; one quarter are fair-to-good stories, which would neither grace nor quite disgrace an average-good issue of *F&SF;* and one quarter (almost exactly by length) is composed of commentary by Ellison or about him (including Asimov's forewards and the personal material on Ellison contained in some authors' comments)—comprising one of the least pleasant autobiographies I have ever been unable to stop reading.

I am not going to comment further on the introductions, except to say that when I found myself so disaffected that I began distrusting my own judgement if Ellison seemed to agree with it, I solved the problem of not being able to ignore the notes by reading them straight through first, and (after a suitable interval) going back to the stories without prejudice. As a further happy accident, the reading copy I had was an advance set of galleys provided by Doubleday and auctioned off at the NYCon a few days ago—so that I am quite unable as I write to give in to the temptation to quote from the introductions, or refer to them specifically. I have notes only on the stories I considered most worth discussing.

I am, therefore, able to state with full enthusiasm and no sour overtones, out of memories still vivid in my mind, that those top twelve stories alone are worth the price of the book (high as it is, and even adding in the possible cost of getting trapped into reading the introductions). If $6.95 is too much for you, let me urge you at the very least (while waiting for the paperback) to find a friend or library or friendly bookdealer, and open immediately to the end of the book: Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah . . .," without doubt *the* outstanding selection in the book.

The rest of the best list includes: Dick's "The Faith of Our Fathers," (among other things, the first worthwhile piece of science fiction I have seen on psychedelics—among, I said, *other* things); Emshwiller's "Sex and/or Mr. Morrison"; Joe Hensley's sensitive "Lord Randy, My Son"; Sonya Dorman's gutsy (very) "Go, Go, Go, Said the Bird"; Fritz Leiber's haunting and evocative "Gonna Roll the Bones"; John Sladek's bitter "The Happy Breed"; Kris Neville's sardonic "From the Government Printing Office"; R. A. Lafferty's oddly romantic "Land of the Great Horses"; J. G. Ballard's quiet/classical "The Recognition"; Norman Spinrad's malignant "Carcinoma Angels"; and Keith Laumer's thoughtful "Test to Destruction."

None of these are stories to hear about, but to read. The four that make up the second quarter of my

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grouping above, however, need some discussion.

Philip José Farmer's "Riders of the Purple Wage" is perhaps the one story in the book that would not have been published anywhere else—in its present form. It is certainly one of the most entertaining—and least "dangerous"—selections, and it suffers only from the fact that it is not quite good *enough* to sustain its highly specialized humor for more than 30,000 words. It is a cheerful, careening combination of neo-Joycean word-gaming and science-fiction imagery, homespun philosophy, homeloomed psychiatry, and witty comment on the contemporary scene—particularly in the arts and academia. But so much of the humor is (Joycean or s-f) in-group, that I suspect there is a relatively small audience eager for such a large dose. I myself laughed delightedly for 10,000 words, grew quieter for another ten, and then put it down to finish—as a duty—later on. (Turned out the only plot point was a lovely pun on FINNEGAN'S WAKE.)

Some incisive editing might have done a great deal, also, for the stories by Robert Silverberg and Frederik Pohl: both of these seemed to me to be written with an emotional involvement, and on a level of prose, right at the (rarely-touched) top of both writers' considerable powers—and both concluded with endings that seemed so feeble by comparison as to be virtually unrelated to the body of the story.

Finally, and sadly, I must add that one other story besides the Farmer would have to be judged homeless without this book—except that Sturgeon wrote it, and there are enough others like myself who are so hungry for new Sturgeon that someone would surely have published it anyhow. I must add, first, that I know the story would not have been written at all except for the existence of this book—and, second, that I took such delight in the sheer texture of the Sturgeon prose, and the glimmering in-out-sights of the Sturgeon images, that I was halfway through (it is a *long* novelette) before I let myself realize that I already knew what the big shock ending was going to be—and that I was neither shocked nor enlightened.

I cannot amplify this charge, of course, without further nullifying the already weak surprise-ending structure; I can only wish someone had made him go back to work on it. Read it, of course; you'll love it: just don't look for satisfaction at the end.

Besides, with a title like this you hardly need a story: "If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?"

Summing up, then—
I am afraid Ellison's New Thing

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resembles to a great degree the same New Thing Anthony Boucher and J. F. McComas brought into s-f in 1949: the not-so-radical-really notion that literary standards could and should be applied to science fiction. A *good* thing, but—

But, among other things, it needs an outstanding editor to use that principle as the main line of guidance—an editor with taste.

In last month's column, I discussed Samuel Delany's novel, THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION, which describes the adventures of Lo Lobey. When Lobey approached the big city for the first time, he saw billboards, with a beautiful woman pictured on them. The first one said:

"The Dove says: 'One is *nice*? Nine or ten are so much *nicer*!' "

The next one said: "The Dove says: 'Though ten are nice, 99 or 100 are *so* much nicer.' "

The same philosophy that substitutes shock for insight, and spectacle for imagery, really *believes* ten is nicer than one, and 100 nicer than ten. As for me, I am happy indeed to see ten good stories instead of just one—but sorry to feel that many readers will inevitably miss the good ones because of the dross they are bedded in.

I do not believe that showmanship equates with artistry; there is no job like a snow job to turn me *off*. Ellison Disneyland is undoubtedly in tune with the Grate Society—but that's not what I read science fiction for. I wish this book had had an editor for the editor. *But*—

It was Ellison who had the idea, and who carried it through, and made it work. It has some *very* good stories in it.

Ironically, while all the talk and temper flares about the (various, ambiguous) New Things, the publishers keep tumbling Old Things (reprints, reissues, barrel-scrapings, "novelizations," and just-plain rewritings of old ideas) off the presses at a rate which now surely exceeds one a day.

Among the best of the recent lot are three honest reprints: Ballantine's 95¢ edition of E.R. Eddison's long out-of-print MISTRESS OF MISTRESSES; Pyramid's re-issue of Sturgeon's THE SYNTHETIC MAN (60¢); and Avon's (75¢) re-issue of Heinlein's STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND—the novel critics and writers hated, and fans loved, and which has now (according to the Word by McLuhan) became an "underground" classic.

Barrel-scrapings Dept.: There is some good reading in Damon Knight's ambitiously-titled THREE NOVELS (Doubleday, $3.95). The two short novellas, "Rule Golden" and "Natural State" are good examples of the socio-adventure yarn of the fifties: one is a "first contact" situation under McCarthy-type

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Security; the other is a colorful post-atom-war story of fortress cities and marvellous mutations. The novelette, "Dio," was an early (1957) venture into the sort of symbolic-writing which now typifies most of the best new American s-f: more of interest historically than intrinsically.

The best of a routine lot of American editions of recent British books is D.F. Jones' COLOSSUS (Putnam, $4.95)—a terrifyingly logical and plausible computer-imposed Utopia, which would have been a first-rate novel with the addition of some equally plausible human characters. Also from Putnam, Christopher Hodder-Williams' THE EGG-SHAPED THING is a sorry comedown from his promising first novel, THE MAIN EXPERIMENT. Doubleday's entry is almost as disappointing: John Lymington's THE NIGHT SPIDERS, although an adequately gripping horror-suspense story, has none of the conceptual excitement or incisiveness of last year's FROOMB!

Old-wine-in-new-bottles: Roy Meyers' DOLPHIN BOY (Ballantine, 75¢) is a Tarzanoid novel considerably fresher and livelier than most of the neo-Tarzan cultbooks. Simple unaffected writing, good pace, and some pleasing underwater stuff (happy shades of Weissmuller!) held my attention throughout.

New-wine-in-old-bottles: Classical mythology has cluttered up the pages of so many recent ponderous-philosophical s-f novels, and magical trappings have become routine accessories for so many shabby medievalist-heroic romances (flourishing for some reason under the "science-fiction" label), that Thomas Burnett Swann's DAY OF THE MINOTAUR (Ace, 40¢) came as a complete surprise. Imaginative, entertaining, and original, it sometimes approaches a Mary Renault level of sophistication in prose and concept, and conveys throughout a color and charm reminiscent of the first-viewing impact of Disney's *Fantasia.*

—JUDITH MERRIL

BOOKS RECEIVED

FICTION

ASHES, ASHES, Rene Barjavel, translated by Damon Knight, Doubleday 1967, 215 pp., $3.95

GENERAL

THE FUTURE AS NIGHTMARE: H. G. WELLS AND THE ANTI-UTOPIANS, Mark R. Hillegas, Oxford University Press 1967, 200 pp., $5.75

PAPERBACKS

LIVING WAY OUT, Wyman Guin, Avon 1967, 60¢
KING KULL, Robert E. Howard and Lin Carter, Lancer 1967, 60¢
GALACTIC ODYSSEY, Keith Laumer, Berkley 1967, 60¢

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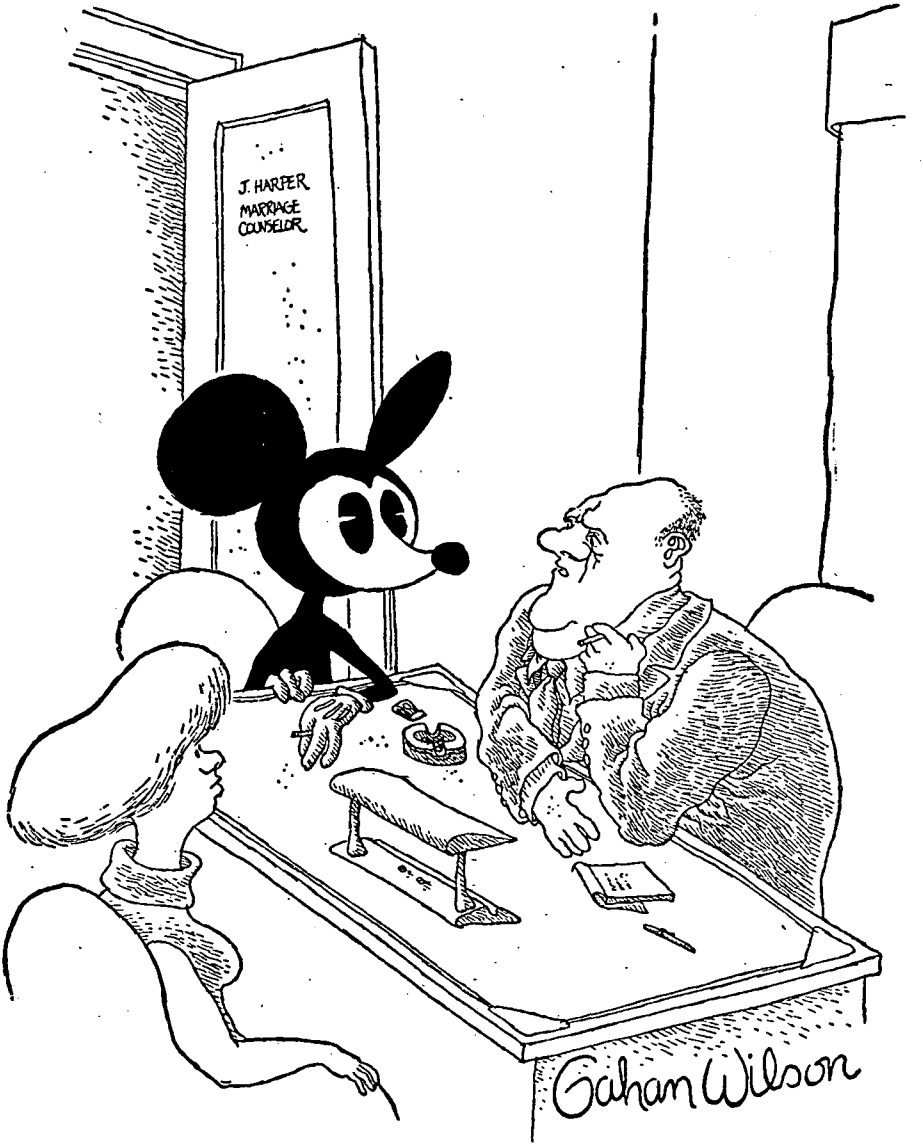

"But surely it must have occurred to you that the wide differences in your backgrounds would make your marriage more than ordinarily difficult."

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Stuart Palmer is primarily a writer of detective and mystery fiction. He has published 22 books in that field, many of them concerned with the adventures of his best-known character, Hildegard Withers. Long-time readers of this magazine will remember Mr. Palmer's occasional and delightful contributions, and those of you whose memory goes back to Vol. 1, No. 1 will recall that his byline appeared in the very first issue of F&SF with a story called A BRIDE FOR THE DEVIL. *Here, Mr. Palmer and his wife Jennifer offer a tale about U. C. L. A. undergraduate Gary Jones, who tunes in on a truly exotic invitation to drop out—one that spans four light years.*

BRAIN WAVE

by Stuart and Jennifer Palmer

THE DOOR WAS LOCKED, THE windowshades drawn tight, but somebody or something was trying to enter his bedroom. Gary Jones was half asleep at the time, somewhere in the never-never land between dreaming and dozing, between euphoria and hangover. His defenses were down, as they are said to be for each of us in that wan hour just before the dawn.

His first impression was that of a flashlight being flicked across the ceiling by some joker, or maybe it was the reflection of auto headlights from the street outside. But there it was, a little lost erratic light where no light should reasonably be. He could see it just as well with his eyes closed as open, which was odd. The apparition was faintly prismatic, in subdued technicolor. And it was somehow attractive, too—just as a lure skipping the surface of a stream might be attractive to a fish down below.

Gary couldn't resist sitting up in bed and reaching out to try to touch the thing. But if it were indeed a light, it seemed to illumine nothing, not even his fingers. Now

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it was coming closer in its erratic gyrations, almost as if it were sentient and groping for something to land upon.

"Well, come in or stay out!" Gary told it. He was tired. He had put in almost fourteen solid hours with the textbooks yesterday, and just before hitting the sack he had taken two Seconal tablets washed down with a warming slug of bourbon. All on an empty stomach, because it was getting on toward the end of the month and because he and Liz had had another of their pointless lovers' quarrels and making up had been expensive. As was almost everything else with that sometimes fascinating, always unpredictable, way-out hippie-type female.

But Gary wished fervently that Liz were beside him now, instead of this crazy Tinker-bell lightthing. And which had by now altered its tactics and seemed to be probing at his skull with soft but persistent fingers. He had a sensation of sounds—not words, but close to it. *"Is there anybody out there?"* was the closest he could come to receiving it.

Gary told himself that he must definitely remember this dream. If it were a dream. But he was a young man who always prided himself in going along with a gag. "Nobody heah in de henhouse but jus' us chickens, boss!" he said.

The answer came hard and clear. *"Who are you? Please answer if you are there. It is important."*

Somewhere he had heard that if you were in the Armed Forces and were captured by the enemy, you were only supposed to give your name, rank, and serial number. So he found himself saying, "Gary Jones here. UCLA undergraduate. Social Security number 567-45-3032."

There was a silent explosion, or a fanfare of imaginary trumpets, or the crashing of chords on some mighty Wurlitzer. The glowing focus of light fitted itself into Gary's mind like a key in a lock, or perhaps more like a hook set by some invisible fisherman. He was now tuned into a program he didn't particularly want to receive. There were some simple arithmetical concepts, and then came the higher equations, then some of what he imagined to be trig. Gary had never been too strong in math.

"Do you receive us?" was the sense of the message.

"Look, if you want Einstein, you've got a wrong number. He's dead, and I'm only an English Lit major, with two term papers overdue. So sign off now and let me get some sleep, huh?"

The message now seemed to come clearer and stronger. *"Brother Garyjones, do not be alarmed. We are (I am?) rejoicing at making first contact with any mind on your world. Praise God (Allah, Buddha, Osiris, Siva, Somebody*

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Up There?) for this important breakthrough. All the best minds of our planet (world, earth?) are linked in this effort, amplifying each other and helping to project thought."

"Who are you?" Gary managed to whisper, still not believing.

"We are (I am?) speaking for the people (folk, denizens?) of our world, the second planet of our star. Will you, of your own free will, try to keep in mental communication with us, oh please?"

"Why not? Only I'm not sure I dig you."

"Please to understand that we can only send thoughts. You must translate them into language, using your own vocabulary. Perhaps this contact may be of great value to both peoples as we learn to think together. It may seem very new and strange to you, but please be patient."

He was still far from convinced. "I could get up and take an aspirin and you'd go away." Gary felt a little silly, like an adult caught in some children's game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Or was it vice versa? "But I'll try anything once —I'm too weak to resist. Yes! This is Gary Jones on Earth, saying that I read you loud and clear. Say hello to all the folks and see what the boys in the backroom will have."

"Message unclear. Your colloquialisms and images are not like ours. But many blessings. We (I?) sense tentative friendship. Your mind does not seem to be locked. Please accept our love (friendship, brotherhood?) Okay?"

"Again, why not? I mean 'yes' if this is really on the level and not some gag from the guys in the Physics or Psych departments."

"Do not be apprehensive. This is on the level. We come as friends."

Gary thought. His radio was off, his TV set was off. There was no way he could think of how anybody could be pulling this gag. But he still couldn't help remembering all the stories he had read about invaders from outer space.

"Just how do you mean 'come'?" he asked. "In a fleet of space-ships, maybe? Yours is a planet that is dying for lack of water and oxygen, and you'd like to take over ours?"

"Negative. Unthinkable. We are unfamiliar with the concept of space-ships, since we travel by thought. Our planet has plenty of oxygen and almost too much water. Our only reasons for making this major effort at communication are simply that we hope to exchange ideas and philosophies."

"It all sounds great!" It belatedly occurred to Gary that there is a great difference between thought and language, and that he was trying to translate alien concepts into English, with a high probability of error. But suppose all this was ac-

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tually on the level? He drew in a deep breath and said, "Friends, I'm afraid you've gone and got yourselves the wrong boy. Isn't there any way I can transfer this call to one of our big brains, who might be able to deal with it?"

"Negative. Contact once established cannot be changed. You are our (my?) Man on Planet X."

"We just call it 'Earth'. I think it's the third planet from our Sun. But if you guys are really men from Mars of someplace, then you probably want to trade something —like your Time Machine or your cure for the common cold, or your Anti-grav, for our nuclear secrets or ionic drive or something. And I'm just not competent. . . ."

"Unclear. Difficult to maintain this channel, which is powered by linkage of almost every not otherwise occupied intelligence on our world. We expect to have better contact next time, now that we can aim directly at you. Will you, Brother Garyjones, be at the same identical place, same time tomorrow, oh please?"

"Okay, I guess. But where in hell—I mean, where in the heavens are you?"

"We are here. Concept of star-maps is very difficult to communicate. We (the people?) occupy the second planet of binary star probably nearest your own, galactically speaking. We are the small green one with only two moons, if this is any help."

"Not much. Our telescopes don't reach planets outside our own system, as I suppose yours do?"

"Ours are even more limited than that. We are not a technical civilization. But we sense that you are not too far away."

"Well, hello neighbors!" Gary remembered that the star nearest our sun is generally supposed to be Alpha Centauri. The inhabitants of its planets, if any, would certainly call it something else, though. "Okay," he said. "So we'll figure that you are calling from Centaurus. Do I call you 'Centaurians'?"

There was a bit of static. *"Unimportant what you call us, dear Brother Garyjones. Except that the name 'Centaurian' seems to have for you overtones of comic 'horse's-ass'. We are serious, and since our previous mind-probes across space have shown that on any planet bearing intelligent life the natives always call themselves 'people' and their planet 'earth' or 'world', we suggest that for the purpose of this exchange you try to think of us as 'otherpeople' and our planet as 'otherworld'. What's in a name, a rose by any other name . . ."*

"Fine and dandy," said Gary Jones, still not believing much, if any, of all this. "I'll expect to hear from you tomorrow night, then. Only—wait a minute!" It had just occurred to him that their planet

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was almost certain to have a very different period of rotation from that of this earth, and that "tomorrow" might mean many things. "Otherpeople, is your time the same as ours?"

"Oops, sorry!" came the answer. There was a long pause, during which Gary had time to realize that perhaps the "otherworldians" were not so omniscient, after all. Then came the thought from afar. *"Obviously we need a yardstick (slide-rule, frame of reference, common denominator?). Any suggestions?"*

Gary was by this time wide awake, or felt that he was. And he was realizing that different peoples must have different cycles of todays and tomorrows. But there should be some *constant*. What? Perhaps the speed of light? That should be the same all over the universe. He got up out of bed and looked it up in the dictionary. Then he said, "The speed of light is 186,300 miles per second. It takes three minutes to boil an egg at sea level." He went on a bit about seconds and minutes and hours and days, hoping that he was making some slight amount of sense.

"Thanks, Brother Garyjones. We (I?) can probably figure it from that. Our best minds will try to cope with the problem. See you around."

"Then okay, man! I'll sign off now and meet you same place, same time tomorrow. Over and out."

"Correction, please. Am not 'man'."

"Oh, NO!" thought Gary Jones. "You are *not* going to turn out to be great big insects, or talking octopi?"

"Unclear. Think of us as 'people' and of me as She-Who-Talk-Thinks-for-Many, okay? And to you, dear Brother Garyjones, Aloha."

The thing was over, the softly probing fingers withdrew from his mind, the light went out. " 'Aloha', yet?" Then he remembered, from his high school trip to Hawaii, what 'Aloha' meant. But he was suddenly sleepier than he had ever been in all his twenty-two years. His face barely had time to hit the pillows before he was gently snoring.

He awakened into the brilliance of Southern Californian sunshine at noon, feeling much rested—in spite of all that dreaming. He had missed a nine o'clock seminar on Marvell or somebody, but what the hell? He had a feeling that nobody, but nobody, had ever had a dream like that before.

Then he saw, as he started to face the day, that his Webster's New World Dictionary was open on the bedside table, turned to "L". Halfway down the column was "light, n., 1.a: that which makes it possible to see . . . this energy is transmitted at a veloci-

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ty of about 186,300 miles per second." It gave him to think. What kind of a dream *had* that been, anyway?

Of course he had to make the major mistake of telling somebody about it. A girl, naturally. He and Liz were sitting later that day on the bare floor of the apartment she shared with two other girls, both now luckily out somewhere. The big lanky red-head was composed with her extremely functional and always dusty feet in an approximation of the lotus-position, and as usual she had an answer for everything.

"So, lover boy, what's the sense in your losing your cool because you had a nightmare and did some sleepwalking?"

"You may be right," Gary admitted, "but sooner or later isn't it almost inevitably bound to happen—communication between planets, I mean? We can't be the only people in the universe!"

"Nuts!"

"But Liz, it was all so real! And you know darn well that everybody forgets a dream within a few minutes after waking. I can remember every word!"

"So you're atypical! But I still bet you weren't hitting the books. You took a psychedelic trip."

"You know me better than that. I don't like LSD and I don't go for pot and I don't even like mellow-yellow."

"Well, I suggest for you, Gary dear, that you try to make love, not dreams. You're really shook up over this vision, aren't you? Let me be the antidote. How about it if I break the house rules and come tiptoeing up to your pad late tonight and cuddle up and protect you through the midnight and morning hours?"

"It's the best offer I've had today. But I'm afraid—"

"I know you're afraid. But Liz will keep the boogeymans away." She wiggled her somewhat meager torso, smiling suggestively.

"But, as I was going to say, I don't know if I'm afraid the manifestation will happen again or that it won't!" He gulped. "But I did say I'd be there on call. I promised."

"Sure—and the promise of Gary Jones is like money in the bank. Confederate money, that is, and in the Left Bank of the Seine. Knock off this Eagle Scout bit, buster! Sure you think you promised to be there, in your dream. And who has to keep a promise to a spook?" Liz was now playing with his left foot, winding her lean fingers around his instep.

"But listen a minute! If by one chance in a million I've been picked, even at random, as the first human being to receive intelligent messages from another world, then it's so big it scares me. I ought to be on the phone to the White House, or to the United

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Nations, or at least to the newspapers!"

Liz gave him a long, cold look. "Lover, you are off your rocker. You are hallucinating, hear? If you tell this wild story of yours to anybody else, pretty soon you'll be wearing a canvas jacket and on your way to the laughing-house at Camarillo!" She engaged him with her arms and kissed him hard on the mouth, and none of it seemed to have much of an impact.

"I'm sorry," Gary told her as he disengaged himself. "But is it okay if I phone you later this evening? I—I just remembered I gotta see somebody."

Liz stood in the doorway, bare arms akimbo, as he made his escape. "Don't hurry back!" she called after him. "So all right—leave me for the Green Maidens from Mars, and who cares? I've been stood up for dinner before."

She was hurt. Even dedicated, way-out hippies like Liz could be hurt. His relationship to her had been occasionally tender, occasionally fierce, but always unpredictable. Only this was one time when she might have listened, really listened. And she hadn't.

And to Gary right now it was all-important that somebody lent a sympathetic ear. Not just the way the bartender in the friendly neighborhood saloon is supposed to do, but *really*. He had really only been making an excuse to get away from Liz and her clinging arms, but now it occurred to him that he actually did have to see somebody. Somebody like Barney Feist, that sterling character and embryo head-shrinker. Barney was a grad student, now going all-out for his Ph.D. He was a solid Joe who didn't talk psych-shop all the time, but who was understandably working on his couch-side manner. He lived alone, and was usually home at this hour.

"Come in!" was Barney's welcome at the door. "Food, drink, and/or chess?" He either loved to be interrupted or else always managed to give that impression.

"It's help I need," admitted Gary as he sank into the proffered chair. "I got me a worry."

"Draft board troubling you?"

"Hell, no. I got called up last fall and flunked the physical."

"Oh sure, the leg. Sorry." Gary had had a touch of polio in his childhood, during the pre-Salk era. He walked without a limp, except when he was tired, but it was enough to keep him out of compulsory gym and also the Viet Nam thing.

"Your girl pregnant?"

"No, Barney. But I had the damndest dream last night, if it was a dream. And I have a date for another one tomorrow morning, strange as that may seem."

"'I had a dream that was not all a dream . . .' or however it goes. Well, old buddy, I'm not too

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strong on the Freudian approach, but dreams indicate something, even if it's only indigestion. But I'll venture to prescribe in advance." And the affable host poured out two mildish highballs.

Thus aided by a slug of ethyl alcohol, Gary told his story—which here at least was received without interruption. "And if it hadn't been for the open dictionary by my bed, I might write it off as hallucination. But nobody looks up references in the middle of a dream!"

Barney stared into his glass as if it were a crystal ball. "No? People have actually committed murder while asleep; the cases are described in Watson somewhere. But you had Psych I and II, you ought to be able to diagnose your own case."

"Which is?"

"Fantasy, pure undiluted fantasy, popping up out of your subconscious. You don't think much of the world we live in, and of the state of our present society. The Bomb—and all the rest of it. You feel yourself a stranger and afraid, in a world you never made, and so you've come up with a lovely answer. You want to live in Dreamland."

"But Barney, is it that simple?"

"It all comes down to *guilt.* You feel subconsciously guilty because other young men get drafted and sent to Viet Nam, maybe to die in the rice-paddies for who knows why. You feel guilty because you got a scholarship in physics and then switched your major to English Lit, which we both know is a return to the poetic and literary past, with little or no meaning in our world today. I venture to state that you haven't read, or at least don't really care about, any poet since Eliot or Pound. Come now! What have you been reading recently—for fun, I mean?" Barney now refilled the glasses, and produced some crackers and cheese. "Science-fiction, maybe?"

"Not much of that recently. I just finished *The Lord of the Rings.*"

"Aha! Tolkien's fantasy about hobbits and elves and knights and orcs, in the world of Gondor! Understand, I'm not knocking it. I dig it myself sometimes. But I don't let it get to me. And I'll bet you a fortune cookie that there's another angle involved in this compulsive dream of yours—more guilt. You've turned your back on the God of your childhood, so you even injected Him into your dream. What did your imaginary friends from outer space say when contact was established? Wasn't it 'Thank God'? So subconsciously you are seeking the lost God of your childhood, and since you feel that He is dead on this earth, you like to imagine Him as alive somewhere else."

"I don't quite see it like that,

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Barney. And do you have to switch from the Freudian stuff to Watson and then back to Jung? I just wanted you to accept the fact that I had a weird and fascinating dream last night and that I'm pretty sure I'll have another one tonight, by appointment."

Barney shook his head. "I guess I'll just have to let you cling to your illusions, if they make you happy. We call it schizophrenia. I suggest that you get tight and call up your girl friend, or vice versa. Not to intrude, but how is your sex-life, anyway?"

"Okay, okay." Gary felt that the session was getting nowhere. "So does everything sooner or later have to come down to sex? Barney, I dreamed of interplanetary thought-messages, I *didn't* dream of a lovely succubus in my bed!"

"But sex did raise its ugly head, or wag its lovely tail, in this dream of yours!" pointed out the psychologist with some triumph. "Your immediate contact at the other end was female, right? She-Who-Think-Talks—and please notice the 'She'. My suggestion to you would be to take a long walk and then when you get back to your pad, take a glass of warm milk and an aspirin and sleep it off."

"Thanks a lot for giving me all this time, and for the drinks." Gary started out, then turned for one last appeal. "Barney, you don't think that there's even the ghost of a chance that this is on the level and that with so many billions of stars out there, there must be millions of inhabited planets and that at these extreme distances perhaps telepathy would be the only way of communicating?"

"Don't ask me, ask the Rhine boys at Duke University. Not that they have made much progress, scientifically speaking. Telepathy is a random thing, if it works at all. You can't turn it on and off. No, Gary, your dream wasn't kosher. You didn't receive one thing that wasn't in your own mind, remember. The slang, the quotes, the 'Aloha' at the end—all home-made."

"Well, maybe you're right." Gary said goodnight and hiked slowly home toward the Westwood campus. First his girl, then his best friend—nobody would take all this with any degree of seriousness. Maybe he had just been talking to himself, having a sort of bull-session with his subconscious mind. But what a roundabout way to do it! He found himself looking up at the stars, or at the few of them that showed tonight through the haze. There was the Big Dipper, and Polaris. Not a lot more, that he could identify. When he got back to his room, he looked in the dictionary again, discovering that Alpha Centauri would have to be in the constellation Centaurus "located between Hydra and the Southern Cross," according to the text. Which meant that the star

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would always be out of sight and below the horizon, from these latitudes.

The previous contact, or whatever it was, had come a little before the first glimmerings of dawn. So Gary set his alarm for 5 AM: he intended to be wide awake when and if it happened again.

Only the glob of light and the invisible hook jerked him awake a little before 2:30—if indeed he was awake. He turned on the bedside lamp, he pinched himself. Still, one never knows.

"Garyjones, are you there? This is the otherworld calling."

"Yes, I'm here," he answered wearily. "But aren't you ahead of schedule?"

"Sorry about that. Evidently your figures for the speed of light are inaccurate. We will try to adjust in future contacts."

"Look, otherpeople," he projected desperately, "nobody here will believe me. I need proof. Am I still talking with She?"

"Affirmative. Same controls, only it is no longer necessary to have planet-wide linkage to secure the necessary amplification, since we now have directional focus. We are now maintaining contact with only a highly specialized and happily dedicated stand-by crew. Now to begin, we suggest. . . ."

"Wait! Look here, if this is for real, can't you send me something, a photograph maybe, so I can prove I'm not imagining all this?"

There was a pause. *"Appreciate the problem. But teleportation between great distances is beyond us. We can only send thoughts, not material things."*

"But even we here on earth can send telephotos!"

"Interesting concept. Will try an experiment of sending mental picture of the group. Please stand by." There was a rather long wait, and then Gary's mind was suddenly filled with a sort of picture, in black and white and not in the best of focus. It finally resolved itself into the flickering image of a group-shot of perhaps a dozen rather human-like figures sitting around a plain, hand-hewn table littered with carved cups and what could have been notebooks—or perhaps slates and slate pencils.

There was no sign whatever of the glittering, spinning "mad scientist" machinery that Gary had visualized. There were just some people (the people?) sitting in conclave at a table. Two were males—if the dark, well-trimmed beards were any criterion. The rest wore only loose white skirts and were bare above the waist, obviously mammalian females. The ears seemed odd, and it appeared to Gary that they all had two thumbs on each hand. There were other differences, but he hadn't enough time to make note of them.

"You are really there? You're not just kidding me?"

"This is She speaking. Do we

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come through?" The picture became the closeup of a face—a beautiful, large-eyed, small-chinned face, framed by short curls or perhaps an ornamental wig. It was not exactly a human face, but neither was it frighteningly otherwise. It even smiled—then everything faded.

"Thanks," said Gary. He suddenly felt very small, and very drained. "This is a little too much for me to take all at once. I'm pretty tired. Nice to meet you, and you've given me a lot of ideas, some of them too new. How about a rain check?"

"Okay, Garyjones. But since you feel that you must sleep, we have a suggestion. Now that close contact (rapport?) has been established, will you permit us to hold on and explore your mind and memories during your period of unconsciousness? We can promise there will be no unpleasant symptoms (after-effects?) for you. And in previous experiments this has proved to be the only way we can pick up your vocabulary and memory-patterns. It will make future contacts much easier, and more rewarding for all concerned. Okay?"

"In for a nickel, in for a dime. I'm a guinea pig, a rat in a maze, and one of Pavlov's dogs, huh? You're sure I won't be brainwashed?"

"The procedure, Brother Garyjones, is simple and harmless."

"You're not lying to me?"

"Negative! Garyjones, think! In a purely telepathic society, how can anybody lie? The very concept is foreign to us."

"Okay, then. It's still hard for me to believe that over a distance of 4.5 light-years you can read me, but go ahead."

"One thing more, please. As soon as you open your mind to me (us?) we can to some extent at least see through your eyes, and receive visual impressions. Do you have a light at hand, and a reflecting surface? Some of us here would like to know what you look like."

There was even the vague suggestion of a giggle across the distances. Gary got up wearily and went over to the bureau and picked up a pocket mirror, then took it back to bed and looked at himself under the lamp. "If you read me, please prepare for a shock," he said modestly.

It must have been a real shock; the static was intense. *"Oh, but you are beardless!"* There was the distinct sensation of surprise and disappointment. *"You are a child, then?"*

"No, damn it! Only kooks wear whiskers here, at the moment. I am an adult male and I shave once a day and sometimes twice. So make something of that!"

"We are sorry, Brother Garyjones. You would however look well with a beard. Must hastily ex-

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plain that all mature males on our planet wear beards, just as all females wear wigs. We are a hairless race, and have been for some thousands of (word lost here) *but we are certain to discover still more interesting differences between us in time. So rest now, since we discover that you are an atavistic person who must spend one-third of his life in unconsciousness. We could explain to you how to avoid that waste of time, but vocabulary is lacking. With your permission, we will now tape-record your brain* (*mind, memory?*). *Please disregard any implied criticism of your not having a beard, okay? Over and out. Aloha!"*

"'Aloha'? That means 'hello' and 'goodbye' and 'God bless you.' But I still think that probably Liz and Barney are right and you are all illusions. But Aloha to you, and so forth. Now let me sleep, please."

They were right about one thing, anyway. Whatever they were doing or trying to do was painless and even soothing; he slept for some hours like the proverbial log and woke up much refreshed. But the catch to it was that he remembered this dream just as vividly as the first. And there was the little mirror on his bedside table, just to remind him.

This day Gary didn't cut any of his classes, and he saw Liz briefly on campus and Barney too. But though both of them looked at him critically and compassionately, and asked too many questions, he lied in his teeth to both of them. Who were they to know, anyway?

"No, nothing is wrong," he said. "Why should it be?"

Gary had decided that this was his baby, his happening, his experience. Maybe there was only one chance in a million that he had somehow got something going with the brains from outer space. But there had to be a *quid pro quo*. If he was really having contact with another and presumably older and higher civilization, if they were milking his mind, then it ought to be a fair exchange. There must be something of their culture that would come in handy here. Like what? Inventions, maybe?

Gary lay awake next night, planning what to ask for—or demand. It was almost like the old tales of the mortal who had the right to ask for three wishes from a leprechaun. You had to make sure about the three wishes; there was always a catch somewhere.

This time the visitation from afar came around 3:45. It jerked him out of sleep again, but that was beginning to be par for the course. There also seemed to be some constraint or aloofness in the tone of the message. *"People to Garyjones. Are you there? Acknowledge."*

"You sound funny. Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing that we (*I?*) *should*

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not have anticipated. It was just that your mind and your memories were pretty racy reading for some of us. Yours is a bloodthirsty world. You differ from us more than we anticipated."

" 'I yam what I yam!' as Popeye says. What's the beef?"

"Brother Garyjones, we love you. But the world you live in, and your society, confuse us. We had high hopes of working out a sort of exchange-student plan and arranging for you and one of our younger males to trade minds for a time. It is intricate to arrange, but feasible. But now, on the basis of what we are learning, we are not sure that we can find a volunteer."

"Whoever said I'd volunteer—provided you could ever convince me that you people can actually switch minds back and forth?"

"We cannot lie. It is true. We have developed techniques of transposing minds, memories, and whole personalities across the light-years. Yet please do not forget—we now know your mind. We think you might like it here in our world, since you seem to be dissatisfied with your own super-technical civilization."

"Could be. But can you teach me how to be a telepath?"

"That ability is usually acquired in childhood here. Besides, you would be miserable with the power to read other minds, in that world of yours. You would constantly live in a state of shock."

"Well," he doggedly insisted, "there must be something! Your world is ahead of ours, in a lot of things. How about precognition? Can you maybe show me how to figure out tomorrow's races at Santa Anita?"

"Insufficient data. Frivolous request. One horse can always run faster than another horse, but not necessarily at any set time."

"Then how about gadgets, inventions, stuff like that? Can't you send me the formula for making gold out of lead fishing weights, or building a levitator, or putting together a pair of binoculars that will let me see the past?"

"Negative, sorry. Unfamiliar with concepts you mention. Ours is not a technological society; we are interested in poetry, music, philosophy, art, and history. Will you perhaps read to us from your books, please?"

"Sure! If you'll play ball with me and let me get a drawing board and some paper and pencils and then let me go into a trance-state so I can do some automatic writing. Send me the plans of one of your latest inventions or discoveries. Do you have a patent office?"

"Concept unclear. Why should anyone withhold discoveries?" But he at least got something of his point across, and the otherpeople were not averse to trying the experiment. He then reciprocated by reading (silently) from the first chapters of H. G. Wells' *The Out-*

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line of History. Then he went into a deeper or perhaps even more trance-like condition and slept deeply. He woke in the late morning to find that, while there were no reference works open upon his bedside table, he had somehow managed to cover the drawing paper with incredibly beautiful sketches of something or other. They were somehow three-dimensional, they were covered with tiny figures and symbols, and they reminded him of the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, give or take a little either way.

But at least they were proof! "Thanks, friends," he said. "Now we are getting somewhere. See you tomorrow."

"Same time, same place," said She— a little sadly. *"But no more Wells, please. Something lighter, perhaps?"*

"Aloha!" said Gary Jones.

That day he cut classes again, and sought out friends in the School of Engineering. They were flatteringly impressed with his drawings, and suggested that he take the artwork to a museum somewhere. "But you mean they're of no immediate value?" he demanded.

"Not too much," said one friend. "Because beautiful as these works are, what you actually have are plans for the McCormack Grain Reaper, the Pump Organ, the Prayer Wheel, and for the Indoor Flush Toilet. Nothing new."

"Thanks," said Gary. He took his beautiful and highly useless dream-drawings and staggered out into the campus sunlight. He had to talk to somebody, and now he felt that at least he had some sort of proof to show Liz. He waited for her outside of Price Hall, where she was supposed to have an afternoon class.

But all Liz had to say was, "Buster, I *am* worried about you now. You're just not with us anymore! To go to all the trouble of doing drawings to prove that your hallucinating is for real!"

"But they're beautiful drawings, and you know damn well I couldn't have created them on my own." He was sullenly defensive.

"Lover boy, I just don't know what you're capable of doing, only I know it would be something nuttier than two fruitcakes!" Liz now gripped his arm, with long, demanding fingers. "Gary, I am the last person in the world to be arbitrary, but you've got to make a choice between the Green Moon Maidens and little ol' me—I mean it!"

"It's not the Moon or Mars, damn it—it's the second planet of Alpha Centauri, the one with only two moons."

"Says who?"

"Says She-Who-Talk-Thinks!"

Liz withdrew a step. "I think you scare me. I think you've already made your choice. Let's quit pretending that you and I have a

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thing going. I'd return your ring, only all you ever gave me was a set of bongo-drums and an imitation Navajo bracelet. The bracelet got lost somewhere in the shuffle, so I'll keep the bongo-drums to remember you by, in case I ever want to remember. Goodbye!"

"Aloha!" said Gary Jones a little sadly, as she turned and ran off. So much for Liz. She was a nice enough girl as girls went, but she never would remember to wash her feet. He called up Barney Feist again that evening, and was invited over for potluck dinner.

"You're looking more relaxed!" was the embryo psychologist's greeting. "So you did listen to me after all, and you put the dream-stuff out of your mind, have you? Good man. I can see that you fixed it up with Liz, too. Great gal, that. Sure, she's something of a tramp-ish character right now, but she'll straighten up and settle down . . . she'll forget the hippie stuff, and knock off the drugs, and make somebody a hell of a wife."

"Yeah, Barney, you mean a new kid every year and payments on the house, and the furniture, and the washer-dryer, and so forth. She'll go to the supermarket in curlers and to the PTA meetings in a rage because somebody didn't give little Johnny good grades. And all the rest of what makes America great, unquote!"

Barney leaned closer. "Say, are you growing a beard?"

"Am I?" Gary hadn't really realized it, but he was—as of now. All adult males on the otherworld wore beards. But meanwhile he tried to relate to his immediate environment, and he and Barney ate some melted television dinners and drank warm highballs and played attrition-chess for a couple of hours. It is the game where one player gets a pawn advantage and then plays cautiously to the inevitable outcome. Gary also brought out his automatic dream-drawings, and got a cold reception.

"Fanciful stuff. I don't dig it," Barney said. "Would make a great wall paper design, though. Work them over sometime. They are all part of your fantasy, but then—look at Kafka!"

"Okay. Well, thanks for the frozen dinner!" And Gary took himself off, toward the spot he called home, stopping at the nearest liquor store to arm himself with a fifth of Old Stepfather. Because he felt somehow that in the next few hours he needed courage, and perhaps even Dutch courage would do.

That night he was only slightly euphoric, and not at all plastered. And when the communication was established, as he had known it would be, it was five o'clock in the morning. The call came through stronger than ever. *"Calling Gary-jones? Are you there?"*

"Yes, I am. So what?"

"Greetings!" But it seemed that

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She and the other technicians at the table had bad news for him. After their global broadcast of his basic mind-memory patterns and of the Wells book, it seemed that no young male on otherworld would volunteer to spend a couple of years, or any time at all, on earth. The exchange student idea would have to be abandoned.

"Okay, then. If that's the way it has to be."

"We are sorry, Brother Garyjones. We had looked forward to meeting you here at our next May Day (Barn-dance, Fertility rites?). There is much you could bring to us. The project is not yet cancelled. Will you read to us again, some poetry or philosophy?"

"Sure—if you'll tell me something. I mean—how do you avoid wars on your world?"

"We have one society, one state, and while in the distant past there were tribal disputes, we have just outgrown such things."

"But still you think the indoor flush toilet is new. Okay, you are basically a communist society, then?"

"Negative, if we understand you correctly. Ours is a basically agrarian culture. We work with our hands. Most of us live on farms (ranches, villages?) and grow our own food. We are vegetarians, for the most part. Our birth-rate is low, and completely controlled. We find joy in linking minds, across our world and across space. It sounds dull? We are getting a negative response."

"Sorry," said Gary. "I wish I knew more about semantics. But may I ask you, what about religion in your culture?"

"We have had many religions in our world. Some beautiful, some terrible. At the present time it is a matter of personal inclination. There is a higher power, but none of us has ever found how to express it."

"Then you have *never* had a Messiah in otherworld? No Man of Miracles who preached and taught brotherly love and then was tormented to death on a cross or broken on a wheel, or otherwise killed in agony for your sins?"

"Negative! What an ugly thought!" There was a surge of revulsion from otherworld. Then: *"Will you read to us, Garyjones? Poetry?"*

"Yes, I will. If I can ask you just one more question. Do you up there have *sex*, if you know what I mean?"

"Of course. But we do more and talk less about it than do your people, from what we read of you."

"Okay, people." And Gary read (if you could call it reading when he only had to see the lines) from the major poets. He also sneaked in some of his own verse. And then when he paused, because his eyes were tired, the otherworld people cried *"More!"* It seemed that everything was being taped and re-

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corded and rebroadcast on their planet, to the general delight.

"But I've got to stop now," he finally said as he put the books away—the *Golden Treasury*, the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and all the rest of the stuff of men's dreams. He took a deep breath. "And I'm afraid I've got to chicken out, otherpeople. You said you'd enter my mind only with my permission. So now I withdraw the permission; so please go away and stay away. I can't take it. You're like somebody showing food through a plate glass window to a starving kid outside. You've got your case history of *Juvenilis Americanus*, and you probably know more about us than you want to know. But you've about ruined me for the world I have to live in. So goodbye, over and out—Aloha!"

"Hold it!" The voice of She (or the thoughts of She) were much sharper. *"Don't forget, Garyjones, that you allowed us to enter your mind, and that at the moment you have no secrets from us. Before you break contact, tell us this: Are you in any way essential to anyone on your planet?"*

"Why, no. Not really. Certainly not to my parents, who have felt me a weight for years. Nor for anybody else, I guess. Why?"

"Then would you care to transfer here, not on an exchange student basis, but for real?"

"You mean, leaving my body behind?"

"We cannot translevitate bodies. You will be provided with a perfect male body, and will have your own personality, your own memories, your own mind. You will be plucked like a bud, and transplanted into this new garden. There may be a moment of pain as you, so to speak, land here, and then you will feel our loving, joyful embrace. You will be born again, among us!"

"You've done this before, you say?"

"Numerous times. Eleven, to be exact. A female person from a planet of Bootes is now our premier danceuse in the opera."

"And you still want me? You think I would fit into your world, in spite of my memories and personality and maladjustment?"

"Affirmative. You will be trained anew." There was a pause. It was perhaps the hardest decision Gary Jones had ever had to make in his entire life, but he knew what he was going to say. Only it was hard to put into words. *"You would like to think it over?"* came the query.

"No. If I think it over I might chicken again. How long will it take to set the thing up—this transference via telepathy of the essential me to your planet?"

"Wait, we will check! In a short time it will be sunrise on the most heavily populated side of our world, and most of us are usually awake to greet the sun. This pro-

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ceeding will take the amplification of all the conscious minds we can link, but stand by. We haven't found a suitable, untenanted body for you, but that should be easy."

Gary got up out of bed and took a hefty pull at the bottle, because he had a hunch it would be his last for a while. Unless the otherworld people had learned about the simple facts of fermentation of the grape. He took a last look around his bedroom, wishing that he could take some of the books with him. But no, that wasn't necessary, since they could dig into his memories for everything he had ever read, given time. But what about the remains? Should he compose them?

"Gary Jones to people. Do I leave my body in bed, holding a lily?"

"There will probably be enough residue of your mind to permit the remains to function, possibly in student demonstrations. Demonstrations of what or for what we cannot say, suggest that it carry signs reading 'LSD NOT LBJ' or something equally pertinent. Does it matter? We are almost ready at this end. Are you prepared?"

"Gary Jones to people," he managed to gasp. "Fire when ready."

Traveling four and a half light-years can be done in a split-second. There was some pain, as he had been warned, and then a gasping for breath of this new air. His eyes didn't seem to focus too well, though he could see the face of a woman (She?) on a hospital pillow, the face of a nurse (also She?) standing by. It was a traumatic experience.

Gary wasn't sure of much of anything, except that suddenly a giant figure in a white jacket, wearing black whiskers and a comforting smile, was now holding him upside down by the ankles and giving him a most tremendous *whack!* upon the bottom.

Gary Jones wailed a tremendous wail, as any obedient newborn baby should. He weighed eight pounds (swergs?) and four ounces (werps?).

"A fine baby boy!" said the doctor.

"I've changed my mind—" cried the fine baby boy, who had until a moment ago been an adult Gary Jones. But it was a little too late.

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Algis Budrys's work in the science fiction field has been of consistently high quality (e.g., the fine short novel, ROGUE MOON*) and, sadly in recent years, of diminishing frequency. This tale is not science fiction or, strictly speaking, even fantasy. It is a story about a story teller, and in a particularly moving and effective way, it relates the imaginary landscapes which are characteristic of these pages and this field to the "real" world.*

CERBERUS

by Algis Budrys

TINA MCKAY WAS OUT ON THE terrace with some new man at Hostedder and Cope. They'd been out there for I guess thirty minutes, and bit by bit anybody else who'd been there when they came out had drifted back into the party. We all just gradually got the idea that it wouldn't be good to go out there. You know that feeling that will spread through a party when somebody's doing a lot of necking in some corner. Nobody says anything, but it just happens that everybody avoids that corner. Or at least, that's true when it's somebody like Tina McKay. I mean we're not puritans or anything like that, and I personally don't like to think that I'm easily embarrassed. But it's one thing for a girl and boy to succumb to passion on a soft summer night, even if at least one of them happens to be married to somebody else, and it's another thing entirely when it's one man or another at each different party, but it's always Tina McKay.

This particular time, the party was up at Sam Eastman's penthouse; you can pretty well figure

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that a good middle-echelon chunk of the industry will be at one of Sam's parties. Sam had the place for it. A penthouse on top of one of those high rises fronting the lake, all furnished in wood and glass, with snow white rugs on the floor. It was a little bit old-fashioned in decor, when you come to that, but Sam had been upper-middle echelon for a long time. Come to that, so had Marty McKay. Before that, it had looked as if there might be more to it for Marty than that—back in the days when he was younger and people were starting to talk about the McKay touch on a campaign—but Marty, he was just too gentle.

We all loved him. There wasn't anybody in the industry that didn't know what a sweet, gentle guy Marty was. Well, take me, for example. I'd started out being a copywriter on his account, and I think he spent about a year just teaching me the ropes. He didn't make a big point of it either. But he could tell you with a word or two, and a little smile, what was worth staying up all night over and what the client wouldn't ever look at anyhow. He didn't tell you your stuff was bad when it was bad, either. But he'd smile a little and say something like: "This tells why the product's good and why people should buy it, all right, but I think in this case we're dealing with a client who read somewhere that brevity is the soul of wit."

You see what he'd do. He wouldn't say you'd made a mistake, or you were bad—he'd drift the whole discussion out of the area of praise or blame, and that would leave you free to look at the job objectively. Working with Marty, you never got the feeling that what might have gone wrong was your responsibility. When I moved on to other accounts, and got to do more in the organization, working with other people and then having other people working for me, there were times when I used to miss Marty's way.

We were standing around the buffet, a bunch of us, at this Eastman party, and I guess we were all thinking about Tina out on the terrace with that new man, and Marty sitting over by himself in a chair near the bookshelves, sipping on one of the two or three drinks he allowed himself in an evening, nodding his head in time to the stereo. I guess there were about a dozen of us, people who knew Marty particularly well. We'd say a few words about something or other—a new campaign we were working on, something particularly stupid the client had decided, or something unexpectedly smart. And every few words one or the other of us would shift his glance over toward the draped sliding glass walls at the end of the living room, outside of which was the terrace, and then we'd look a little uncomfortably at the other people

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in the group, and then we'd go back to talking shop.

You know, the world you talk about has very little to do with the world you live in. Everybody knows that what you talk about is just a job. Somewhere else in some other time, it would be another job, and it would probably be a different crowd of people, most of whom you met through your job, but it would still be you. I mean, when you come right down to it, we knew we were all strangers, come together by accident. So, if you think about that, you can see that at a party like this you know it's just another party, and you know you didn't have to meet Sam Eastman, and you didn't have to meet any of the other people in this room or like them, except maybe Marty McKay and a very few others who lived a little more openly, a little more thinly behind the needs of the job. I mean, the real things are things like fear and kindness, love . . . that kind of thing, that takes place anywhere, and always has. But if you open up that can of worms, how could you enjoy a party at Sam Eastman's?

So we'd look over toward where Tina had gone, and then we'd look over at Marty, and I don't know about anybody else—yes, I do, I guess—but I'd feel this knot working up inside me, and I'd wish Tina wouldn't keep throwing it in our faces, and I'd wish she and Marty were standing there with us.

We'd start to shuffle around, and sound funny. The rhythm of the conversation would break. We'd get a little loud; somebody would come out with some opinion, say about something completely trivial, like, oh, Tim Poole's pushing "White Like Snow" for that shortening slogan—exactly that level of trivia, and the next thing you'd know there'd be two guys almost shouting at each other not over the slogan as a sales tool, good or bad, but over grammar. Really shouting, although of course they'd laugh a little between sentences. And we'd glance more often toward wherever Tina was.

And right at about that stage, and we all knew it was coming, Marty would get up from his chair and come wandering over, smiling a little, his eyes twinkling. It always happened; I don't know whether after the first couple of times it happened, we got nervous and loud partly to make him hurry up and do it. But what he'd do, and he'd do it as pleasantly and as smilingly as you could imagine, coming over looking completely harmless, was he'd just sort of join the crowd of us, and maybe take a fresh drink or a canape, and he'd grin a little at us standing there, as sweet and gentle and as innocent as anyone could possibly imagine, looking at each of us, and as soon as he had our attention he'd start very quietly with something like this:

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"You know," he'd begin—this is the one he told at somebody else's party about a month before the Eastman thing—"All this reminds me of the time Bradley Huntington Bradford III was flying across Africa to inspect his oil holdings in Kuwait. . . ." He'd hold up his drink or his canape, or gesture toward the buffet.

"Anyway, Bradley Huntington Bradford III was flying this company plane of his over the Sahara—headed southeast, he was—and he was deep into the desert when suddenly his starboard engine began to cough and sputter, and the next thing he knew it had stopped dead." Marty would take a sip of his drink or a bite of his canape, and his gentle blue eyes would peek out at us from under his eyebrows.

"Well, he still had one engine left so he wasn't in a panic yet, but then about fifteen miles farther on the other engine began to miss, and the next thing he knew he was out of power, in the middle of nowhere, and piling down toward the ground at a great rate. Well, he did his best, but he was just an oil millionaire, not a really qualified pilot, and he hit the ground pretty hard. He was thrown clear, but the plane went up in a cloud of smoke immediately; just blew up all over the place, and when Bradley Huntington Bradford III came to, he found himself all alone in the middle of the desert with absolutely nothing but the clothes on his back, and no food or water.

"Well, being an oil millionaire, he was a pretty resolute character, so he began walking in the general direction of the coast—it didn't matter which coast really, because they were all just about the same distance away, about seven or eight hundred, maybe a thousand or two thousand miles—but he kept walking. The only thing was about the third or fourth day he began feeling pretty peaked. He was staggering over the sand, holding his stomach, as a matter of fact, and out of his head with delirium, muttering 'Food! Food!'

"Well, as it happened, Jesus Christ and Saint Peter were strolling around the heavenly battlements above, discussing some important point or the other, when Jesus noticed this voice drifting up from down below, and said, 'Say, isn't that Bradley Huntington Bradford III down there, asking for something?' Saint Peter took a closer look, straightened up, and said, 'Be damned if it isn't. Seems to be hungry.'

" 'Well, send him down some manna and let's get back to business,' Jesus said, so in no time at all, as Bradley Huntington Bradford III staggers around in the desert, a bushel of manna comes whistling down out of the sky and plops into the sand right in front of him. Bradley Huntington Brad-

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ford III mumbles 'Thank you' and falls down on his knees and eats all the manna—every bit of it—and rises back to his feet much revivified, restored to the vigor of his young manhood. Once again, he sets out toward the coast, picking grit out of his teeth. And in fact, he's about fifty or sixty miles farther along, and it's the following day, before once again he becomes delirious and begins to stagger over the sand with his hands around his throat, mumbling 'Water! Water!' "

At this point, Marty had smiled impishly and taken a good sip of his drink. The rest of us were standing there, as we always were, watching him.

"Well, up in the sky," Marty had gone on, "Jesus and Saint Peter were still lost in conversation, but this new interruption did eventually get through to them. 'Seems to be Bradley Huntington Bradford III again,' Saint Peter said.

" 'Oh? What is it this time?'

" 'Seems to need water,' Saint Peter said.

" 'Ah-ha!' Jesus said. 'Well, there you see it, Peter—just what I've always contended. Brad does not live by manna alone.' "

And Marty would just stand there, twinkling.

I don't know where he got them from. They were always like that. I guess he had to make them up himself. He had others. There was the one, for instance, about the alcoholic building developer who'd gone broke and had to live in one of his own creations, which was way out in the woods beyond any roads, and furthermore had an unfinished sewer ditch cutting it off from the rest of the world. Marty had explained very logically how this poor bastard, trapped out there, nevertheless felt the need to go into town every other day and bring back a case of beer, which he had to hide from his wife, up in the crawl space under the roof. What with the ditch, and then having to hoist the beer case up through a trap door in the ceiling, it made sense it would take a leap and heaving to take Anheuser home. But what can you do when Tina's off in the kitchen, or the spare bedroom, or the backyard, and everybody knows it, and everybody likes Marty McKay, and just about when you're really getting worked up about it, he comes over and springs one of these on you? It could have gone this way for a very long time; it could have broken the back of every bad mood we were getting into, until we were all old or drifted out of the industry, or he was retired, or Tina was retired —or something.

He was coming over toward us now, moving softly and puckishly over the rug that was white as snow on Eastman's penthouse floor, skirting one of those big round wooden-framed coffee tables with the glass insert top,

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and for the first time I realized just how big a case of the willies it all gave me, because I could see everybody else with me twitching his eyes helplessly toward Marty. We were fascinated by him. I hadn't thought of it that way, but there it was.

He must have been awfully sensitive to human moods, and the things that work on people, so he must have known that we were all holding our breath, watching him come toward us. But when he got to us, he was just smiling, a little sheepishly and a little slyly, the way he always did, and he took up a stand where he could look at all of us at the same time, which put him with his back to the draperies and the glass wall, and he took a dainty little bite of a canape.

"Yum!" he said. "You know, there was once a Chinese Emperor, very long ago, who had only two vices. One of them was concubinage, of course, and the other one was listening to the wind play through the branches of his rock crystal mulberry tree." Marty's eyes twinkled. "Now this mulberry tree had been made for a remote ancestor of his by a court artisan of legendary skill. Ancestor and artisan were long gone, of course, but the rock crystal mulberry tree remained, perfect in every detail, set up in its own little planter in the courtyard of the palace grounds. Every evening just at dusk, this present Emperor of China would have himself carried out to the courtyard in his palanquin, and there he would be set down by his crowd of palanquin-carrying eunuchs, and he would listen as the evening wind came in off the China Sea and blew gently through the fragile leaves of the rock crystal mulberry tree, thus producing harmonious melodies of unparalleled and serene beauty. There was nothing the Emperor would not leave in order to go listen to his tree every evening; no affair of state or of the heart could dissuade him from this fascination.

"However, as you might guess, one of the results of concubinage in those days was children, and one hot sunny afternoon a plethora of these kids was playing kick-the-can in the courtyard, and in his enthusiasm one of the little tykes kicked the can right into the tree, which shattered into a hundred million pieces.

"Informed of this disaster, the Emperor immediately called for his own court artisan, a man of considerable skill and fame, but perhaps not quite a match for the artisan who had originally erected the tree, and spoke the simple command: 'Fix!' Gulping, the court artisan went to do so. A detachment of the palace guard was set to crawling on its hands and knees through the dust of the courtyard, gathering each shard and sliver of the shattered crystal. Each of these pieces was tenderly

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and carefully brought to the workshop. Working with tweezers and glue, rising at dawn and falling into uneasy slumber only during the small hours of each morning, the court artisan spent six months conscientiously fitting the shattered pieces together, until finally, by dint of unremitting dedication and all the resources of his skills, he had completely restored the form and glitter of the tree. This was then returned to it accustomed place in the courtyard, and that evening, informed of the project's completion, the Emperor, trembling with anticipation, was once more brought out into the courtyard."

Marty spread his hands helplessly. "Well, I can see you're ahead of me; the artisan had done a beautiful job of making the tree look normal, but it was full of fractures and cleavages of one kind or another, and when the wind came off the sea, what resulted was the most hideous cacophony that had ever assaulted the ears of any gentleman of Cathay. Wroth with disappointment, the Emperor called in the court executioner, pointed at the court artisan and said: 'Fix!'

"The executioner having done his duty, the Emperor now not only had no working tree, he also had no artisan. Calling in the Grand Vizier, the Emperor waved his hand to indicate the general situation, and said, as you might expect: 'Fix!' The Grand Vizier thought fast.

" 'Well, sir, your majesty,' the Grand Vizier said, 'there shouldn't be too much difficulty about this. The Shah of Iran is said to possess the finest court artisan in the contemporary universe. There is no doubt in my mind that this artisan could successfully repair the tree. There *is* some doubt in my mind that he would be easily persuaded to make the exceedingly long and tedious journey between Iran and Cathay, but I am quite sure that if I were to go there and state the nature of the case he would, indeed, be so persuaded, would arrive here in due time and would effect repairs.'

" 'Quite so,' said the Emperor. 'And since it is such a long journey, I think I'll just send the court executioner along to keep you company.'

" 'Oh, hell,' the Grand Vizier said inaudibly, but then he said, 'Great!' loudly. 'I'll order a junk immediately,' and went off to do so, closely followed by the executioner, who was smiling."

Marty looked at each of us, grinning a little. There was still nothing stirring the living room drapes —nobody was trying to come back in from the terrace. There was a very light glow of perspiration on Marty's forehead. There was a very light glow of perspiration on all our foreheads. Well, you can get worked up at parties.

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"So the Grand Vizier took his junk down through the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, and through the Malay Archipelago, and through the Andaman Sea, across the Bay of Bengal, around Ceylon, past the Maldives and the Laccadives, and across the fabled Arabian Sea, into the Gulf of Oman, and thus, journey by journey, arrived at length at the court of the Shah of Iran. There, being no fool, he scouted the ground while the court executioner fretted, and in due course determined that the court artisan of the Shah of Iran had only two vices, one of which, of course, was concubinage, and the other of which was a fondness for *haute cuisine.* Taking thought, the Grand Vizier then proceeded to the dwelling of the court artisan, and knocked on the front door. When the court artisan answered, the Grand Vizier introduced himself and explained the situation.

" 'Cracked rock crystal mulberry tree, eh?' the court artisan said, scratching under his turban. 'Well, I've got to admit it's an intriguing problem.' He paused and thought for some time. 'But . . .' he finally said, 'no, it's an awfully long trip. Down the Persian Gulf, and across the Arabian Sea, and past the Laccadives and the Maldives, and through the Malay Archipelago, and then up through the South China Sea and the East China Sea . . . well, you can see why a man might not want to make that trip just to repair a tree. Not that I couldn't fix it, mind you . . .'

"The court executioner began to get noticeably restless at the Grand Vizier's elbow," Marty said, "and therefore the Grand Vizier did not delay in playing his first trump card: 'You understand, of course,' he said to the court artisan, 'that with your position at the court of the Emperor of Cathay go certain —ah—privileges. For one, you get first dibs on all imperial concubines being retired for new models.'

" 'First dibs on all imperial concubines, eh?' the court artisan mused. He snickered. 'Is it true what they say about—'

" 'True,' the Grand Vizier assured him. 'Whatever they say.'

" 'Hmm. . . .' But then the court artisan shook his head. 'No . . .no, even if it's true, I've got the same rights here, and I don't have to get seasick to exercise them. No, it's a temptation—I'll grant you that—but. . . .'

" 'Sauteed Ortolan,' the Grand Vizier quickly said.

" 'What the hell is that?' the court artisan said.

" 'Oh, it's a dish of the country,' the Grand Vizier said disarmingly. 'We have this bird in Cathay which is unobtainable elsewhere. These are commonly trapped in silken nets by maidens specially trained for that single purpose, and then

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tenderly plucked and prepared by the Emperor's own chef, before being placed in dishes designed for that sole purpose and served by another group of maidens who are ignorant of all other arts save that especial one. It is said that only the Emperor and certain very rare favorites of his have ever tasted sauteed Ortolan. I myself have never had the privilege, but I'm sure I can arrange it for you.'

"The court artisan was obviously staggered by this offer, and pondered it for quite some time. But then he slowly shook his head. 'No . . . no . . . even so. . . .'

"The Grand Vizier could feel the court executioner tugging at his sleeve. Twisting his arm away, he blurted out to the artisan: 'Sweet and sour pork!'

" 'I beg your pardon?' the court artisan said.

" 'Sweet and sour pork. You take this pig which has been quartered with this jeweled saw, and you take one of the hams, and you treat it very carefully, and then you take this special sauce made with Ann Page vinegar and Karo Syrup, and you. . . .'

"The Grand Vizier had judged his man shrewdly. Each syllable of his mouth-watering description was obviously having a profound effect on the court artisan, who broke out in a great sweat, his eyes bulging with lust. 'Stop!' the court artisan cried. 'Enough! You overwhelm me! I'll go with you! A bird and a ham is worth tuning a bush!' " And Marty grinned.

I don't know. What could you do? We looked at each other. Marty had done it again—he had broken up the mood, and what could you point to to show he had done it on purpose, that he'd hurt anybody by doing it? Some of us were even laughing at the joke.

But this time, Tina made it too raw. Just as Marty finished, she and that new man came in off the terrace. She looked as if she'd just stepped out of a steam cabinet. Her hair and her dress were limp; there was lipstick and eye makeup all over both their faces, and she was actually folding down the tab on her zipper. We were all looking past Marty, and I know we looked like a firing squad. But Marty never turned around. He stood there grinning mischievously and sweating just a little bit, and I became so fascinated with him that I really saw the pink scalp shining through the salt-and-pepper hair thinning on top of his head, and the deepness of the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, and three or four hairs of white stubble on his upper lip where his razor hadn't quite reached all the way. He didn't look right to me; he didn't look like the Marty McKay he should have been, and in my head I heard myself saying: "Turn around you son of a bitch, you poor son of a bitch, turn around!"

Tina and the new man stopped

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just inside the living room. For once she didn't find a party going on inside when she came slipping back in. What she saw was a whole bunch of people who knew her well, standing there staring straight at her, past her husband. She shrank back a little, away from us, and away from the man. She patted her hair.

I don't know what got us moving. Maybe somebody just sort of took a step because he wanted to shift his balance—but when whoever it was that moved, the rest of us moved, and we just sort of—well, and maybe somebody jostled Marty by accident—anyway, he was sort of pushed into turning around, and moving forward with us. I mean it wasn't like any storm trooper squad jamming forward up a street or anything like that. It was just a sort of general motion on the part of all us, but Marty was caught in the middle of it, and the next thing we knew was that he and Tina and the new man were sort of enclosed in the middle of us.

Nobody wanted to do them any harm. I mean, I don't know what we intended or what we wanted from the three of them, but somehow Marty got jostled again or something and he fell forward a little bit against the new man. The new man put up his hands to catch him—I could see the surprise and worry on the new man's face; he didn't intend anything, and he didn't know what was going on either—and Marty sort of got pushed back, but somebody else was moving forward behind him, not realizing, and he got pushed forward again, and the new man put up his hands again, and—

Well, it would have been funny, if you had seen it from off to one side, Marty tripping forward, and the new man pushing back, and Marty pushing forward again. Tina was completely blocked out of the way, and now there was just Marty and this man, both of them sweating. Marty looking pale and bewildered, and the new man red-faced and staring. And suddenly it just got to some kind of point, and the man pushed Marty back hard, but at the same time that whoever was behind Marty got out of the way, and Marty went into this coffee table, which was the first the other people at the party realized that there was something going on. There was a funny spanging noise and the glass top of this coffee table broke, the pieces falling into the frame, and there was Marty in there caught at the knees and shoulders by the frame, with this big son of a bitching piece of glass coming out up through his chest.

He lay there just staring up at us, and then he began to look faintly apologetic. The thing that flashed through my mind at that instant was the old cartoon about

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the wife at the cocktail party who's fallen through a cane-bottomed chair, and the husband covering for her by saying: "Agnes, I've told you a hundred times—that's not funny!"

"Get him *out* of there!" Tina cried, and we started to move. Somebody ran to a phone, and the rest of us carefully and tenderly lifted him up. The piece stayed behind, jammed in, and he sucked up off it. We laid him down on the rug, and there we were, then, with him on his back there looking up at us, and us standing around him in a circle of feet.

He smiled up at us. He shook his head slowly from side to side, and his eyes rolled around as he looked up at our faces. Somebody remembered to turn off the stereo. We were all standing there—what could we do? "There's an ambulance coming," Tina's new man said breathlessly. He was the one who'd gone to the phone. Somebody cleared his throat. Looking down at Marty, out of the corners of my eyes I could see people's feet shuffling. Marty's jacket was open, and there was the front of his shirt, with the necktie sprawled out of the way. I didn't see anything you could put a compress or a tourniquet on. Tina was standing there swaying from foot to foot and moaning. We looked at Marty and he looked at us. He blushed.

Then he grinned a little. "What a way to hold an audience," he said. "You know, once upon a time, there was an old Shakespearean actor. He hadn't ever made it very big, and as we join him now he is in a fourth-rate rep company touring the sticks. With him are various leftovers from careers best forgotten and a sprinkling of stage struck amateurs, one of whom is his latest wife, an aspiring ingenue who first joined him under the mistaken impression that he would show her how to reach the top."

He wasn't talking any more loudly than he ever did when he started one of these things. You had to bend close to listen.

"Through town after town," Marty went on, "the young wife had proven herself unfaithful to him with every passing stranger who caught her eye. Finally in the town of Wet Prairie, North Dakota, came the denouement.

"Wet Prairie, North Dakota, had once known its days of glory as the gopher skin capital of North America. At that time, the burghers of the town had erected the Wet Prairie Opera House, a rococo wooden structure of considerable pretensions, which since the demise of the gopher skin industry, had served in turn as a nickelodeon, a fundamentalist house of worship, a New Deal grain elevator, and finally as a closed circuit television fight theater. This doddering edifice was nominally under the care of an amiable character named Galahad Gustafson,

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only child of the late widow Matilda Gustafson, who had had artistic pretensions in her day, and who had died of mortification when it became clear that her only son's career in the arts had found its culmination in his appointment as custodian of the Wet Prairie Opera House.

"Galahad was by now of a certain age—of an age with the old Shakespearean actor, as a matter of fact—and the two men struck up a friendship. This friendship was based on Galahad's side in blind hero worship of anyone who had ever trod the boards, and on the actor's side by a sort of inner admission that naive friendship was better than no friendship at all."

He was stringing it out as much as he ever did, and his voice wasn't really getting weak, but he was saying the words a little more quickly than he usually would have.

"Galahad Gustafson had put his all into preparing the theater for its week's performances. He would lean on his broom for hours, while the company rehearsed on stage in the light of the single work light on its stand in the center of the splintered old stage. His eyes devoured everything—the mis-timed gestures, the swallowed lines, the bursts of over-acting. It was with a great pang of shock that he realized the ingenue was straying into the wings to exchange fervent declarations with a visiting lightning rod salesman whose eye she had caught at the depot. Furthermore, he had noted to his sorrow that as soon as rehearsal was over, ingenue and salesman would slip away to the Tanners' Rest Hotel, there to seclude themselves in a top floor room, not to emerge for hours."

Now his voice was getting weaker. The stain in the rug was beginning to creep out from under the back of his jacket. He took a shallow, careful breath, and with his eyes twinkling, went on.

"Galahad could only conclude that the old actor was not aware of his wife's mis-doings, that in his stately, gracious way of life, there was no room to take notice of common human frailty. He determined to present the actor with incontrovertible proof of his wife's disloyalty, thinking that then the old man would come to his senses and would rid himself of the young, attractive wife."

Down in the street, way down, in among the deep walls of the buildings we could hear a siren whooping nearer. Marty wet his lips, and pasted the grin back on. I found myself bending over to catch his voice with my hands on my knees.

"So— so Galahad got his Polaroid camera and loaded it with color film, hooked in his strobe flash, got his light meter and his gadget bag, and surreptitiously followed the ingenue and her lover on the night following the final

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dress rehearsal." Marty's eyes twitched back and forth among us. "Waiting until the lover and the wife had been locked in their room for fifteen minutes or so, he suddenly kicked in the door and fired off all six exposures as fast as he could pull the trigger, tear off the tab, and peel the positive away. Stunned and startled, the dishevelled lovers sprang from the bed, but by then it was too late. Galahad was pelting down the hall, bearing his evidence."

Now we were on our knees around him. I'm not ashamed to say it—on our knees. The siren was hooting down to a stop in the street in front of the apartment.

"The lover, stunned and guilty, could think of nothing to do but to try to intercept the bad news, or failing that, to reach the actor and somehow explain to him before Galahad could find him. Hastily dressing, he shinnied down the drainpipe outside his window, and, thus gaining precious ground on Galahad who was clattering down the stairs, the lover loped across the town square and into the opera house where the old actor was rehearsing some final touches of elocution, alone on the stage, the rest of the company having been sent off to the railroad diner for some needed nourishment."

There was something wet under my left knee. I had to hold myself up with my arms stiff as I bent closer and closer to Marty's face.

"Onstage ran the lightning rod salesman, just as Galahad burst through the lobby doors and began running down the center aisle, waving his pictures. Startled, the actor turned toward the salesman. The salesman, beset with panic, remembered that in his pocket was a .32 caliber revolver he carried to protect himself from stray dogs as he trudged his rounds from farm to farm. Intent on concealing the truth, he yanked it out, intending to shoot Galahad dead and then make up some story to account for his actions. But the stage was old and splintered, and the salesman's foot turned. The gun discharged and sent its leaded freight plummeting through the dismayed actor's doublet. Galvanized with surprise and dismay, the salesman turned and dashed from the house never to be seen in North Dakota again, while the old actor lay sprawled under the work light, arms and legs flung out, thin life bubbling from him. Galahad came stumbling up onto the stage, equally shaken, as unable to think rational thoughts as the salesman had been. All he could think to do was to wordlessly hold up the photographs . . . before the actor's . . . blurring gaze." Marty's eyes twinkled faintly. "The actor's face fell into the lines of a wan, rueful smile."

His breath was faint and warm on my cheek. I was listening, listening with all my heart. It was

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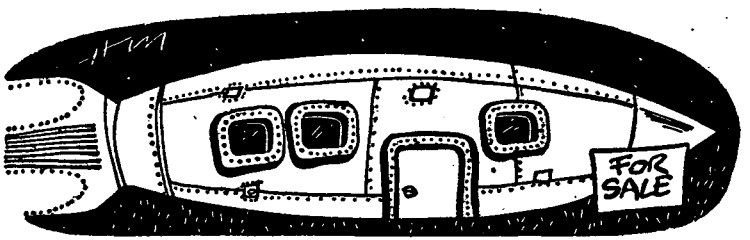
himself he was talking about, and me, all of us. It had always been him and me and all of us he had talked about. What a fool I'd been never to realize! I thought at last I could understand him; I could feel what he felt, be in his place, share with him what we all were. Marty smiled into my eyes. "And the old actor . . . staring at the photographs . . . tried to be kind to Galahad. He said—"

And Marty was dead. His eyes closed. His mouth fell slack, and his head fell over to one side. We all sighed. I straightened up. I was standing there in the middle of the circle, with everybody pressing in around me. I had to step one foot over Marty's body and straddle him to keep from losing my balance. I turned my head slowly, and I looked at every face, and I knew —I don't know how I knew it, but I knew it as sure as I was born, I would bet on it any time—I knew what Marty's last punchline had been, and I said it for them. I said it for us all: "Good prints, sweet knight."



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NOISE

by Ted Thomas

IT HAS BEEN CLEARLY ESTABlished that prolonged exposure to noise damages animals and men. Destruction of inner-ear tissue can range from slight changes in the hairy cell endings to complete destruction of the terminal acoustical apparatus known as the organ of Corti.

Sound intensity is measured in decibels, and whenever a man is subjected to an intensity level of 85 decibels or more at a frequency of more than about 3000 cycles per second (cps), he may suffer serious loss of hearing. Frequencies up to 3000 cps are the most important for understanding human speech.

Undue noise has also been blamed for high divorce rates, ulcers, and other organic diseases. This is doubtless exaggerated, but when rats are exposed to 100-decibel wideband noise, measurable and deleterious changes show up in their brains, livers, and blood. High cholesterol levels and heart enlargement can also occur. Yet the so-called white noise—a gentle purring sound—can actually relieve tension in people.

By checking the hearing of the Meban tribe in Africa, a quiet-living bunch if there ever was one, the scientists have about established that people's hearing does not get worse simply because they grow older. The din of modern living does it.

What we need, then, are tunable ear plugs. Our skills at microminiaturization could develop an ear plug that would pass only those sounds we choose to hear. The ear plugs could be set for conversation or music, or whatever. Truck and traffic noise could be reduced to a susurrus. There would be no more shouting and yelling because no one would hear it. The shriek of jet aircraft and the sonic boom would no longer be with us. At night the white noise would put everyone to sleep who wanted to sleep. People's dispositions around the world couldn't help but improve. And then, if we could develop glasses that did for vision what the ear plugs did for hearing, we'd really have it made.

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Worship of the sun was common to almost all the ancient religions. It was the carrier of light and life, symbol of truth and justice to the Babylonians and Persians; symbol of masculinity to the ancient Chinese; the supreme deity of the ancient Japanese and Incas. To contemporary astronomers, the sun is a body of gases with a diameter of 865,000 miles and a surface temperature of about 11,000 degrees Fahrenheit—in size, brilliance and age, an average star. Here is a good story about Jessie Poul, to whom the sun was not an average star. His job was to direct a ship from Earth to the sun and back.

TO BEHOLD THE SUN

by Dean R. Koontz

what would it be like
to step quickly
into the roaring
of the sun
and walk down its streets
of golden apples
and shapeless streetlamps . . .
Amishi, *Star Dreams*

"BECAUSE IT'S THERE," I SAID.

There was an appreciative murmur of laughter from the press. The twinkling lens of NBTri-D seemed like jeweled eyes of mythical dragons.

Bacon of the *Times* raised his hand and waved.

I suppressed an urge to wave back. "Mr. Bacon?"

"Exactly how many days will the trip require?"

"I believe the answer to that can be found on the data sheet that Space Cent handed out a half an hour ago." Twenty-four going and twenty-four coming home—x-plus days there. What we found would dictate the length of our fiery visit.

There was a waving of hands. Again the silly urge. I fought another urge to scream. Instead, I said, "Time," rising and moving away from behind the small desk.

Unasked questions burst forth

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from a dozen lips as if they had suddenly acquired a life of their own and refused to be restrained by lips and teeth and gum. "Sorry, sorry," I shook my head, exiting from the conference chamber via a small door at the rear of the stage.

Krison was waiting in the hallway.

"Fine," he said.

Krison always said, "Fine—but—"

"But," he said on schedule, "perhaps you shouldn't have been so abrupt, so—well, anti-social."

"I can afford to be," I snapped.

"But the project can't. We at Space Cent get our funds from Congress, and Congress, in turn, gets its funds from the public. Tell them what they want to know. Straight off the proverbial shoulder, tell them that unmanned probes have discovered as much as possible. Tell them that men must now go in a heavily armored ship to study surface turbulence at close quarters. Tell them about solar flares and solar wind and about how we must know these things before safe space travel is made cheap and easy. But for God's sake, don't brush off the people!"

"My job isn't public relations. I promised to cybernet the ship to and from—not to answer a lot of foolish questions."

"If you didn't want to be the center of public interest," he said with a moronic grin, "you shouldn't have had an affair with Mandy Morain."

"It isn't an *affair*," I snorted and walked even faster toward the door at the end of the hall, beyond which rested my hovercar.

He paced me. "Remember, tomorrow starts a four week period of training, exhaustive runs. Mandy Morain will be out of the schedule for a while."

"Yes, coach. I know the rules." I slammed the door as quickly as I opened it. But it only hummed shut softly, and I could feel his grin on my back. Bruce Krison was the ultimate pest—a perfectionist.

It was raining a misty, cold sort of rain. It nibbled at my bone marrow. The temperature inside the hovercar, a Champion, was a comfortable seventy-four, so I took off my coat, loosened my tie, and settled back in the seat. There was a stiff pain in my neck. I needed relaxation, but there was no place in particular I cared to relax *at*. The bars would be crowded since the offices closed within the hour, and crowds weren't much to my liking. I thumbed the city-oriented group of maps into the car's "brain" and punched several random coordinates. Closing my heavy eyes, I settled back to rest with the soft moan of rushing wind blowing under the rising craft . . .

"No," she said. "God, God, no."

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He coughed blood and stared at it lying in a black pool.

His leg seemed pinned beneath the rubble, but when he looked, it wasn't. It was simply turning slightly blue, streaming blood where he could see the skin through torn trouser leg. Slowly, he became aware of her soft moaning, mixed now and then with a thick, gurgling noise.

Explosion!

There were other sounds around him. Now and then a chunk of plaster fell with a crash. The whine of white metal cooling to red was the screeching of wild animals in his brain. Steam hissed. There were other moans in the distance, and the sounds of sirens seeped through the walls of flames.

"Marie," he whispered, for he was afraid to speak aloud.

There was an indistinct mumble, a thick gurgle. He forced himself to his knees, and his leg felt better. Only a slight cut, the blue color proving to be concrete dust. The entire scene was out of Dante. The fire walls were high, and the wreckage of the theatre was mixed with parts of what he recognized as a cybership. Some Sensitive had been used to his limits and had not been able to center the ship into the landing cushions of the Port two blocks away. He had set her down, rather had crashed her into the theatre.

"Marie," he whispered again, feeling the throb of his heart race almost out of control. Then, dragging himself through the dust-choked ruins, he topped a pile of rubble and saw her . . . . .

Her eyes were gone.

Her face was blistered and blackened.

And the black sockets of her eyes bled rust water . . .

"My God. Kill me. Kill me," she screeched at him.

"Marie," he whispered.

"Mercy. Kill me!"

His stomach fluttered, tumbled. He couldn't! Not kill her! God please strike them both dead!

He staggered away. He broke into a run. But to the far limit of the fire walls, he could hear her. "Kill me! Jessie, Jessie, please!"

And the worst of it was, he felt no pain. She suffered, and sitting next to her, he escaped.

The fire walls danced.

JESSIE! The scream shook the world, and hands from outside pulled him through the fire walls . . .

I woke to the crash of raindrops against the windscreen, and it was the sound of rocks smashing down a mountainside. I threw up my psychic defenses and dulled my cybernetic tendencies.

It was an old dream. Five years old. I wiped the sweat from my brow and looked at the unwinding map. It was an old dream, but nevertheless disconcerting.

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Sector three, segment two-ought-two. And while that registered, the car drifted to a halt, was scanned by a private robogateman, and swung again into a tree-lined drive.

In the right mood, I might have laughed. It was Freudian. Positively Freudian that when I wanted to punch a random set of coordinates, I would select those that brought me here. I didn't laugh, however, my mood bordering on morose.

She said, "Jessie, come in."

She was wearing a black minisuit, and her honey hair spilled like wild, sparkling rivers down her slender shoulders. Her eyes were blue, sky-like pieces of crystal.

"Fine," I said. "I'd like to."

"Should I send the servants away?" She was wealthy enough to afford human rather than robo servants.

"No. Training begins tomorrow, and I might just as well begin denying myself tonight."

She curled up on the couch, tucking her legs under her. "You're set on going then?"

"Yes."

She was everything the newspapers and magazines and Tri-D tanks said she was. Her breasts were high and firm, her belly flat, her legs long. Goddess legs. And her face fairy tale princess', sugar, and naughty spice. Mandy Morain had been the rage of Modern Hollywood until a year earlier when she startled the filmworld with "I wish solitude to find the man I love."

She had received four thousand offers overnight.

She could easily have had many more attractive lovers than Jessie Poul, cybernetist. Much more responding lovers too, lovers without my periodic "trouble."

I had met her on the set of *Languish Queen.* They had hired me to cybernet a cave to tell them just when to expect a cave-in. I was to scream a warning three minutes ahead so they could remove MM and the other stars to safe ground. We hit it off immediately. We seemed—almost—to fit like two pieces of a puzzle in our own snug corner of the total picture.

She leaned over and kissed me. I felt myself, like fireflies, melting into the darkness of her sheltering night. "No," I said.

"No?"

"Tomorrow is training."

My eyes seemed to rivet to the leaping flames in the simu-fireplace.

"Tomorrow has not yet come." Her voice was like a soft summer breeze.

The flames were orange and red and yellow and tinted with green.

"Tonight is the threshold to tomorrow." I'm not sure whether I ran out of the house or walked, but when I got home, I let the

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videophone ring, knowing it was she. With malice aforethought, I drank myself into a fitful sleep. Dreams filled my head, and a face without eyes asked me *why do you want to go to the sun? Why to the sun, the sun?*

The following weeks were what Krison had promised—work that would break a bull's back. We ran and re-ran emergency situations. We tested the ship. I familiarized myself with it, with the feeling of the intricate wiring, the platings, the cyberpickups, the shields. In all the lanes of space, there was no ship so heavily shielded as ours. She would have to withstand more raw radiation than we really had a right to ask of her. Other ships had become death traps in radiation storms of less intensity than the ones we would face. If it had been economically feasible to build all ships as well insulated as she, then our trip would be unnecessary. But the cost was—to make a pun—astronomical. The only other alternative was to study the origin of the solar winds in hopes that we could eventually predict radiation storms in space and detour ships around them. Ours was a history-making ship. She was a good ship. There are good ships and good women.

"There are good ships and good women," said Malherbe, the captain.

"I only knew one," I said.

"One? Why, I've captained a half dozen good ones in the last twenty years."

"I meant women," I said, putting down the coffee and moving to the window to watch the sunset. It was difficult to imagine soaring toward that lantern, toward the gaseous, nebulous, semi-living creature in the sky. But in a few weeks . . . There were pinks and yellows and soft blues, and a man could lose his thoughts, could hypnotize himself almost like watching a painted spiral on a wheel—spinning and spinning and spinning and . . .

It happened the next morning at eleven o'clock. Malherbe, First Officer Blanksman, and ship's doctor Amishi were coping with a series of fake emergencies that a group of security men had thought up—most of which could not possibly occur aboard a saucer. A fire had been started in a mock-up of the ship, and the three were to stop it before irreparable damage could be done. Of course it was ridiculous, for the plasterboard of the mock-up burnt very much more rapidly than would the special alloy of the real saucer. I stopped a moment to watch the fun and games.

But Fate was in rare form that morning. The heat—something the security experts had not connected with fire—ignited a stack of boxes behind the "stage". There was a sudden explosion that

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rocked the mock-up, and the wall of crates came tumbling down over the wooden saucer, burying the crew.

They said I screamed. I only remember running, tearing at boxes, heaving them out of the way with a furiousness I never knew I possessed. I dragged Amishi out onto the safe floor. He was unconscious but unburned. I remember seeing Malherbe and Blanksman too—all three safe. And the fire crew waving hoses and fog dispensers.

I don't know why I rushed back in. But they had to drag me out in the end. Whimpering, Malherbe said. Whimpering.

Schedules were re-worked, and the launch date was moved back ten days. Everyone was given a thorough psychic probe. The big shots wanted to be sure no traumas from the incident would render us incapable of acting when we reached our target—Old Sol. But they didn't check back any farther than *that* fire.

The day after the near disaster, I came across Amishi sitting in the coffee shop. He was composing one of his poems.

"Let's go
down foggy paths
in twisted moonlight
in purple moon-night
in some overwhelming
sort of madness
taken through open-souled osmosis
from hatter-mad flowers
And let's go
holding hands and laughing
I feel your arteries throbbing
Let's go
in the cool ice of evening
through haunted forests
where trees bend
to the white world's end
craggy and awful
to snatch away unsuspecting souls
who think Nature
is a mother and not a liquidator
Let's go
strangers in a strange land
orphans of the heart
strangers in a strange land
now cinders drift apart . . .

"I think it fits," Alexander said. He was the young operator of the robomechs that would take care of any repair job I might sense during the flight.

I nodded agreement.

"I mean, it *is* a strange land indeed!"

Amishi looked at me, half embarrassed. "I want to thank you for yesterday." His yellow skin seemed to redden slightly.

"No need for thanks, just part of the job."

"By the way," Alexander interrupted, "how's the ship feel?"

"Fine. Fine as a ship could feel. Your robomechs may be useless extra baggage."

He winced at that, and I was glad I had said it. I didn't like Gingos Alexander.

"Glad to hear optimism," a booming voice said behind me. I

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turned to see Bruce Krison smiling like an idiot.

"You're smiling like an idiot," I told him.

"Thank you," he smiled. "That's one of the nicer things you've ever said to me."

"Everything running smoothly?"

"Yes," I said curtly.

"What about the incident of the fire."

It was blunt. Too blunt not to catch me off balance. "Close," I finally said.

"Too close. And unnecessary."

"I thought the others were still in the fire."

He looked at me steadily, and I returned his gaze, afraid to, but afraid not to. He sighed. "Well, there's a phone call for you."

"A phone call?"

He winked. "A Miss Morain."

"Tell her I'm not allowed to talk while in training," I said, straightening my tie and turning to leave.

She called for the seventh time on Launch Day. But conquest was in my blood, and the great eye of the sun lay ahead.

I died in less than a fragment of a millisecond.

I looked out and saw my body strapped in a chair, needles puncturing it, glucose bottles dangling delicately above it like transparent fruit on a metal tree. There were dark circles under my eyes. I looked dead—gray and all. And it always seemed, that flash of an instant when I left my body, that Death had freed me.

Behind my body sat Amishi, in charge of regulating my slowed metabolism—in charge of my life. The lights on his scopes pulsated green and yellow. In the shadows stood the captain, without duties, trying to look like his job really mattered. We all knew that it didn't; he was an ornament, a leftover from the days when men sailed the seas and lower skies.

I left that scene, slipped into a heavy cable and shot like light wriggling over every coil, around every twist, faster than the biggest roller coaster ever, laughing. Everything proved to be intact, and disengaging myself from the system, I fled back to the contrasting quiet and darkness of the cyberbase in the dome of the saucer where I was to rest and survey with only a skim setup to warn of impending crisis.

It was the second day out. Six hundred thousand miles gone. It was the second *night* out in reality. In the darkness of the cyberbase, in the coolness of its crystal body, retiring my mind within my mind, the strange sleep of cybernetic unawareness crept over me, and the time for Daily Rest was at hand.

"Because it's there," I said. (Man's desire to conquer Nature

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drives him to all heights and depths, proving his sovereignty, I lied to myself.)

There was an appreciative ROAR of La-ha-ugh-ha-ter from the press.

Bacon (of the Times!) waved his hand.

"Mr. (pig: unspoken) Bacon?"

"Exactly (!) how many (#) days will the trip require????"

A lady reporter called from the rear: "Why do you want to go to the sun? Why to the sun, the sun?"

"Because it's there," I said/ lied into her empty eyes . . .

Upon waking, I ran routine checks and found everything up to par. I peeked from a well-placed rivet and saw Amishi talking to Malherbe. They appeared to be arguing, but before I could esp out and hear them, they separated. The conversation was over.

Plasma bottles dangled over my head. A million miles went by.

The fourth day I slept.

And Alexander dreamed. I heard about it the next morning. They had a sign placed in front of my body. JESSIE, CONTACT US. WE MUST TALK. SOMETHING HAS COME UP.

I trickled out of the shielding, through the wires, back into my own head. They put the ship on automatic, taking a risk they never should have—machines being so unreliable—and revived me.

"Dreams," Malherbe said.

"So?"

"We've all had them. Ever since we left earth. Last night, Alexander woke up, and his dream continued. It was standing in his room!"

I looked at Alexander. "What dream?"

"It was horrible," he said. Although I figured he had probably been delirious at the time, I could see the way he quivered when he thought of it.

"That tells me nothing."

"A—thing, actually. It was gray, large, and spoke with a strange, feminine voice."

"It spoke?"

"Yes."

"What did it say?"

He squirmed. "Not to the sun, my boy. Not to the sun."

"That's ridiculous."

"That's what it said."

"Have you checked the ship?" I asked.

"The first thing," Malherbe said. "There's nothing on her that isn't meant to be."

"The jitters," I said. "Simply a case of the jitters. Why did you call me out of cybernet?"

"We wanted to see if you had been dreaming too," Malherbe said.

I looked around and saw the slightest traces of fear on their faces. Fear of the Unknown. You could not fear a star whose heart you were going to approach; it

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was too vast a thing to fear, so you made up something more human —but not quite—to center your animal passions on. It was that and nothing more. "I have to get back," I snapped. "We have a long way to go, dreams or no dreams."

In the cyberbase, out of my body again, I thought about it. There *was* something to it. Of course it had to be psychological—all of them having the same dream —something basic, something buried in every soul, a racial fear. Interesting.

On the eighth day, I slept, the world having been created some time earlier.

The following morning, the eye of the sun was nearly sky-filling, a monster streaking to gobble us up along with Venus and Mercury which lay ahead.

Venus passed by dream-like. Gases and clouds and somehow erotic.

On the eleventh day, I slept, thinking of the sun. Visions of fire balloons danced in my head.

The next morning, they had a sign in front of my body. Red felt letters on a black background: JESSIE. CONFERENCE. MOST URGENT.

It was the same as before.

"Dreams?" I asked.

"They went too far this time," Malherbe said nervously, and I noticed that he had personified the dreams. "They attacked Alexander. They cornered me, but my screams drove them away."

"Them?" I asked.

"Well—IT," Gingos said. His arm was bandaged, and Amishi confirmed the statement that there were eleven stitches required to close the wound.

"Let's hear it," I said. My body felt weak even though Amishi had been exercising it every day.

"I woke up, and it was crooning to me. 'Not to the sun, my boy. Not to the sun, the sun.' I told it to get the hell out. It kept coming closer. Big as a robomech, ponderous. It kept chanting too. Then I saw its face—as much as the shadows would permit me to see. Thank God for shadows. There were two gaping craters instead of eyes—no other facial features that I could see. I screamed, and it trundled out before anyone could come—but not before it grabbed me and whispered the chant to my face." He held up his bandaged arm as if that were legal evidence.

I looked to Malherbe who was nodding his head in agreement.

"And *your* story?" I asked.

"I woke up to Gingos' screams. As I was getting to the doorway, the thing came upon me from the corridor. In the semi-darkness, I could make out its shape only as a hulk. It moved toward me, but I started screaming, and it was gone down the companionway. We didn't see it again all night."

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I sighed.

"Jess," Amishi said, "don't take this too lightly. Other things have been happening. I am missing nearly all of my Simu-Life Grafting Flesh. If we have any serious wounds, I will be powerless to patch any of them."

"We've discovered that we're missing a hand torch too," Malherbe chimed in, his chimes sounding like death knolls. "A cylinder of fuel for it too."

"Okay," I said. "Don't panic." They looked to me for guidance. A cybernet is supposed to know all that happens in his ship—or at least to be able to account for it, explain it away, rationalize. Somewhere inside, the explanation did indeed stir through my vitals, but I couldn't completely grasp it. "Let's conduct a search with an impartial point of view—mine."

We searched every deck. In the bottom deck, fifty robomechs were lined up, bent at the flexible waist as if doing toe-touches, their heads at their feet, waiting to be activated. But no monsters.

We covered the supply chamber inch by inch, opening crates, unsealing canisters. Nothing. We checked drive chambers. We investigated crew rooms. We searched the airless outer chamber. Nowhere was there a creature of horror, nowhere a warning soothsayer sent by the sun.

They were a little more cheerful when I departed into cybernet, for we had a plan. I was to watch Malherbe's room from the walls, waiting for the approach of the beast. They were sure I would see it too. Upon sighting it, they expected me to turn the ship around and make for home. I knew I wouldn't. I wanted the sun, for some reason.

The room was washed in shadows. It was like a crypt, one lonely bed, cold walls. Malherbe was restless. That was the last I remembered.

The thirteenth day, the sun was like a god.

The temperature was way up on the outer hull, and I checked the decks of refrigerating units that would help regulate our internal atmosphere. I examined the shells of force between each deck —shells that would repel heat to a certain degree. Everything was functioning perfectly.

The sun was like a god, all-commanding.

The fourteenth day, temperature on the outer shell rose two hundred and fourteen degrees.

I watched it through filtered hull cameras. The sun was now like the sea. A womb. A mother of life into which we were crawling, the beginning and the end. It was all and everything, and its great comforting eye stared unblinkingly.

The sixteenth day I slept.

The seventeenth I did nothing but watch the sun.

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The eighteenth day I slept.

And the nineteenth.

The twentieth day, the hull was cherry red, streaking white in spots, and I flipped the frig units to full capacity.

The sun glowed: it covered the sky; it simply *was*.

On day twenty-two, they had a sign up. I saw it accidentally. I was drawn to look at my body. As we neared the sun, the desire to see if my body was scorched. . . .

But there was a sign. JESSIE, GOING CRAZY. THE THING WON'T LET US ALONE AT NIGHT. HAVE TAKEN TO SLEEPING IN GUARDED SHIFTS. WHY HAVEN'T YOU BEEN CHECKING IN? WE WANT TO GO HOME. WE'VE BEEN PUTTING UP SIGNS FOR DAYS. IT HAS TAKEN TO DESTROYING OUR FOOD. CONSTANT TERROR HERE. WE WANT TO GO HOME AGAIN.

I had forgotten to check in. For how many days? The idea struck me terribly hard. I had never missed a check-in in ten years of cyberneting. I zipped through the decks to make a final check of all systems before slipping into my body.

And I gasped at the sight of the sun. It was the universe. Arms reached out from its living surface and stretched like the arms of a lazy man waking. There were dark clouds on the surface, shifting and changing. It hurt my shielded eyes.

An hour passed, and I could not look away.

It was a shifting mass of liquid fire. It was all the fires of all time. It was Nero in Rome. It was Chicago. It was San Francisco after the earthquake. It was the great Moon Fire—a thousand domes filled with burning atmosphere. It was all fires of all times. And it screamed. It tortured its lungs. It was all the fires of all the times and all the victims of all those fires of all those times. It was Alpha and Omega. It was Hell living. It was Heaven dying. The fires roared. The victims screamed.

I fled in fear, through the refrigeration units, tripping the shut-off switches. I slipped through cables, through walls, madly searching for a way out—but really wanting none. Looking to see if my body had yet blackened, I looked onto control deck. Amishi's body was draped over a chair, his neck broken. Malherbe was literally shredded, and Alexander was lying in a red-black pool, his hand clenched into a fist. The temperature was seventy-nine. The sun had not murdered them.

A sign said: JESSIE. STOP IT FOR GOD'S SAKE. IT' S YOU. AMISHI SAYS IT'S YOU. THE MONSTER IS A ROBOMECH YOU'RE DIRECTING, AND

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WE CAN'T STOP IT. WHY, JESSIE? THE FACE YOU PUT ON IT WTH PLASTIC FLESH —NO EYES, JESSIE. AND BLISTERS AND SCARS. HORRIBLE. COME TO YOUR SENSES, JESSIE. MY GOD, JESSIE . . . JESSIE, LISTEN. LOOK, TURN THE SHIP AROUND. NOT TO THE SUN, JESSIE. THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, ISN'T IT? NOT TO THE SUN? STOP THE ROBOMECH. STOP HIM NOW, JESSIE! NOW! NOWNOWNOW! NOW—

I wept. I wanted to turn around. I didn't want to turn around. Both and neither.

I soared, spinning through the decks of the ship, upward toward the outer shell, the refrigeration units off. The heat more and more intense. Whimpering.

Whimpering.

The sun is one great god-eye. The sun taketh away, and only the sun can returneth.

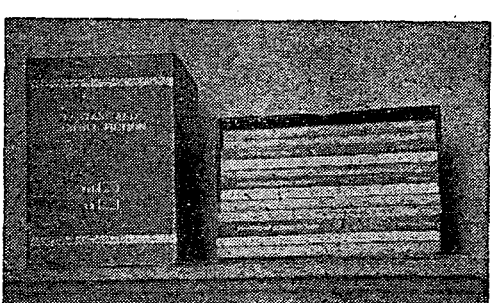
The heat is strong on my mind. My body is forty decks below, and the temperature there is a hundred and four. The heat is stronger on my mind in the outer shell. It hurts me, it hurts. The walls of flame sting and are Hellish.

Please Mandy . . .

Please Mandy . . .

Help me to come home again. . . .

The sun offers no consolation, but stares with two black and empty eyes . . .



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Gahan Wilson has a somewhat imposing, ex-fullback physical presence, but he cheerfully admits that his Midwestern childhood followed the usual pattern for humorists, "in that, outside of the fantasy part (Frankenstein and Dick Tracy), it consisted mostly of playing endless dull ballgames very badly." After four years at The Art Institute of Chicago and a brief stretch in the Air Force, Mr. Wilson came to New York, where he had the talent and good fortune to: 1) become a successful cartoonist (first, primarily for Colliers, *later for* Playboy) *and 2) marry an attractive and charming girl named Nancy. The most casual reader of this magazine over the past two years will be familiar with Gahan Wilson's distinctive cartoons (a new collection,* THE MAN IN THE CANNIBAL POT, *will be released in November by Doubleday). His fiction may be less familiar, a situation that we are pleased to correct by offering this delightfully absorbing story.*

THE POWER OF THE MANDARIN

by Gahan Wilson

ALADAR RAKAS GAVE A WICKED grin and raised his brandy glass.

"To the King Plotter of Evil. To the Prophet of our Doom. To the Mandarin."

I joined the toast willingly.

"May he never be totally defeated. May he and his vile minions ever threaten the civilized world."

We drank contentedly. Rakas leaned back, struck a luxurious pose, and wafted forth a cloud of Havana's very best.

"How many have been killed this time?"

Rakas tapped an ash from his cigar and gazed thoughtfully upward. I could see his lips moving as he made the count.

"Five," he said, and then, after a pause, "No. Six."

I looked at him with some surprise. "That's hardly up to the usual slaughter."

Rakas chuckled and signaled the waiter for more brandy.

"True enough," he said. "However, one particular murder of those six is enough to make up for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of ordinary ones."

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His dark eyes glinted. He arched his thick, sable brows and leaned slowly forward.

"I have given the Mandarin a real treat this time, Charles," he said.

"You have, have you?"

I took a quick, unsatisfying puff at my cigarette and wondered what the old devil had been up to. I tossed out a guess.

"You haven't let him kill Mork?"

The brutish Mork. The only vaguely human emissary of the insidious Mandarin. He was, in his apish way, ambitious. Perhaps he had gone too far. It would be a shame to lose Mork.

Rakas waved the idea aside with an airy gesture.

"No, Charles. I have always liked Mork. Besides, he is far too useful as a harbinger of horrors to come. No, I would never dream of killing the dreadful creature."

Belatedly, a grim suspicion began to grow in me. Rakas was making quite a production out of this revelation. It would be something very much out of the ordinary.

"As a matter of fact," he continued blandly, covertly watching me from the corners of his eyes, "the only one of the Mandarin's henchmen to die in this particular adventure is a Lascar. A low underling hardly worth mentioning."

The suspicion hardened into a near certainty, but I tried a parry.

"How about the Inspector? Have you let him kill Snow?"

"Why bother? Inspector Snow. The poor blunderer. No, Charles, this murder is one of the first magnitude. This murder is the one which the Mandarin has burned to do since book one."

He looked at the expression on my face and grinned hugely.

"Of course you've guessed."

I gaped at him unbelievingly.

"You're joking, Aladar," I said.

He continued to grin.

He'd let the Mandarin kill Evan Trowbridge. I knew he'd let him kill Evan Trowbridge. I swallowed and decided to say it out loud and hear how it sounded.

"He's killed Evan Trowbridge."

It sounded like a kind of croak. Rakas gave a confirming nod and continued to grin.

I won't say that the room swam before my eyes, but I did wonder, just for a moment, if I was going to faint. I sat in my chair building up a nervous tic and thinking about Evan Trowbridge.

Who was it who stood between the malevolent Mandarin and his conquest of the world? I'll tell you who. Evan Trowbridge. Who was it who foiled, again and again, in book after book, the heartless fiend who plotted the base enslavement of us all? None other than Evan Trowbridge.

And now he was dead.

I wiped the palms of my hands carefully with my napkin and

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cleared my throat. I could think of nothing else to do, short of leaping over the table and crushing in the top of Aladar Rakas's skull.

He looked at me with some concern. I suppose I looked like a man trembling on the verge of a fit. I may have been.

He sighed.

"You must understand, Charles," he said. "If only you knew how often I have ached to let him do it."

"But why?"

His eyes shown dreamily.

"Evan Trowbridge," he said. "Pillar of the Establishment. Pride of the Empire."

He had turned deadly serious.

"Do you know where the strength of a Trowbridge lies, Charles? I'll tell you. It lies in his sublime conviction that he and his kind are superior to all other men. That anyone who is not both white and English is automatically not quite a human being."

He ground out his cigar forcefully, yet precisely, as if he were sticking it into a Trowbridge eye.

"It's different here in America," he said. "Do you know what it was like to be a poor Hungarian in London? Speaking with a foreign accent? Looking alien? Liking garlic and spicy foods?"

He looked down at his huge white hands and watched them curl into fists.

"I dressed like them. I even thought of changing my name. Then I realized I would only make myself more ridiculous in their eyes."

He looked at me, and then his expression softened and he chuckled.

"Wait until you read how the Mandarin kills him, Charles. It is a masterpiece, if I do say so myself. It takes an entire chapter."

I bunched up my napkin and tossed it on the table.

"So what happens to the series, Aladar? Have you thought about that? Who the hell is going to fight the Mandarin?"

He brushed it away.

"Somebody will, Charles. The series will continue. We will continue. I have several possibilities in mind. I have thought, maybe, a Hungarian. Maybe someone rather like myself."

We finished our coffee and parted in widely divergent moods.

I took the manuscript to my office, informed my secretary that I was strictly incommunicado, and read *THE MANDARIN TRIUMPHANT* from its first neatly typed page to its last.

I discovered, thank God, that it was good. Really one of his best.

I had been afraid that the hatred for Trowbridge which Rakas had just confessed would show through, and that he might turn him into some kind of villain, or, much worse, a quivering coward, but none of this had happened. The brave Britisher fought the

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good fight to the end. The Mandarin, after having committed what really was a masterpiece of murder, even spoke a little tribute to his redoubtable foe just before boarding a mysterious boat and vanishing into the swirling fog of a Thames estuary:

"He was a worthy opponent," said the Mandarin in the sibilant whisper he adopted when in a thoughtful mood, "In his dogged fashion, I believe he understood me and my aspirations as no man has done."

Slipping carefully from the plastic coverall which had protected him from the deadly mold, the towering man bent respectfully to the nearly formless heap which lay at his feet and, with great solemnity, he made an ancient Oriental gesture of salutation to which had once been Evan Trowbridge.

I closed the manuscript feeling much for the better.

After all, I figured, Rakas had managed to make the Mandarin series into a very successful enterprise with Trowbridge, and there was no reason to see why he couldn't go right ahead and carry on without him. It was the Mandarin who really counted, and if the heroic Englishman irritated the author all that much, I couldn't see why he shouldn't be allowed to go ahead and kill the bastard. There were a few bad moments with some of the other editors but, in the end, we all sat back with smug little smiles playing on our faces and waited to see how Rakas's new champion fared in the struggle against the vast criminal campaign of the diabolical Mandarin.

One very comforting development was the unexpectedly large popularity of *TRIUMPH*. The critics who had rejected the previous books as being too much loved it. They liked the idea of the super hero getting horribly murdered. It moved the whole thing into a campy sort of area where they could relax and enjoy without being embarrassed.

We worked a series of tv and radio slots for Rakas, which was something we'd never done before, and he clicked. The public liked his sinister presence. They relished him in much the same way as they did Alfred Hitchcock. There is something very reassuring about a boogeyman who's willing to joke about his scareful personality. It eases all sorts of dim little fears and makes the dark unknown seem almost friendly. This sudden celebrity pleased Rakas.

"It is very nice," he told me. "I was walking down the street the other day and a beautiful woman came up to me. 'Are you Aladar Rakas?' she asked me. And I told her I was. A perfect stranger, and that very night we went to bed. I like this being famous."

I asked him how the new book was going.

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"It's coming along nicely," he said. "My hero is a Hungarian, as I warned you he might be. I have not given him a name yet. I call him Rakas, after myself, for now. Later on I will figure out some name for him. I want it to be just right, of course.

"He is not a bullhead, like that Trowbridge. He is a man who thinks. The Mandarin will have his hands full with him, you will see. I think the only real problem will be to make sure that this new hero of mine doesn't finish him off in the first three chapters."

Then he laughed, and I laughed with him.

It was just about two weeks later, about four in the morning, when the telephone rang. I knocked over the alarm clock and upset a full ashtray before I managed to bark a hello into the receiver's mouthpiece. I expected to hear some fool drunk blurting apologies, but I got Rakas, instead.

"Charles," he said, "could I come over? I'd like to talk to you. Now. Tonight. I'm worried."

I told him he could. I slipped on a bathrobe and groped my way into the kitchen. I'd just finished brewing a pot of coffee when the doorbell rang.

He looked bad. He was pale and I think he'd lost weight. I noticed his hand shook a little when he lifted his cup.

"What's wrong, Aladar?"

"It's the book. Here." He had a manuscript in a folder and he passed it over to me. "It's not going well."

I considered giving him a little lecture about office hours and then decided to hell with it. I turned through the pages. Everything looked fine. A man killed by a poison dart on a misty wharf. The new hero narrowly missing death by scorpion-stuffed glove. A brief meeting with the Mandarin himself in a dark Soho alley.

For an instant Rakas saw the huge forehead, the glittering eyes, the deep hollows of the cheeks, and then the light snuffed out, leaving only a skeleton silhouette.

"You are confident, Rakas," came the harsh, icy whisper. "You consider me a puppet, a marionette."

Suddenly Rakas felt his shoulder grasped by a merciless talon which seemed hard as steel. He grunted in pain and tried to twist free.

"There are no strings on this hand, Rakas," continued the chill muttering of the Mandarin. "It kills when I want, and releases when I wish."

Then the talon wrenched away, and Rakas found himself alone.

I lit a cigarette and read on happily. It was around the end of chapter eight when I saw the beginnings of the drift.

The awful spasms of his dying had twisted the face of Colonel

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Bentley-Smith's face into a grotesque grin, and this look of dead glee seemed to mock the perplexed frown of Aladar Rakas.

"I don't understand, Inspector Snow," he snapped, "didn't you deploy your men as I asked you to?"

"I did that, sir," replied the puzzled policeman, "but they got through to him without one of us having the foggiest."

Rakas snarled and ground his teeth together.

"Then we have sprung our trap upon a corpse!"

I looked up at Rakas.

"How did they get through?" I asked.

"That's just it," he said. "I don't know!"

He pulled out a cigar, started to unwrap it, and then shoved it back into his pocket.

"You've read it," he said. "In chapter seven I show how I, or rather I show how Rakas, has made absolutely sure that the Colonel's study is inaccessible. Every window, every door, all possible means of approach are under constant observation. There is no way, no conceivable method, for the Mandarin or his minions to have snuck in with the cobra."

He sat back and spread his hands helplessly.

"And yet they do get in, *and* out, and no one the wiser."

I flipped an edge of the manuscript and looked at Rakas thoughtfully.

"Let me show you," he said, leaning forward and taking the folder from my hands. "Let me show you how it happens again." He thumbed through the pages. "Yes, here it is. Here is something just like it."

"Would you like some more coffee?"

"Yes. Sure. Here Rakas has rigged the mummy case in the museum so that there is no feasible way for anyone to open it and remove the body of the sorcerer. The slightest touch on the case's lid and an alarm goes off and cameras record the event. A fly couldn't land on the damned thing without setting off the apparatus. And yet the Mandarin does it. I don't know how, but he pulls it off."

I began, "Aladar—"

"No. Wait," he said, cutting me off. "That's not all. Here, in chapter fourteen, here's one that really gets me. I absolutely defy you to explain to me how he manages to poison the—"

This time I cut him off.

"Aladar, it's not my job to explain how he does it. I'm merely the reader. You, Aladar, are the one to explain it."

"But, how?" he asked me, flinging his hands wide. "I would like you to explain to me how?"

"Because it's a goddam story, Aladar, and because you're the goddam author. That's how."

It took him by absolute surprise. It seemed to stun him. He sat

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back in his chair and blinked at me.

"You are the one who's making this up," I said, waving at the manuscript which lay, all innocence, on the kitchen table. "You made up the Colonel and the Mandarin and the whole thing. It's you who decides who does what to who and how they do it. Nobody else but you."

He reached up and squeezed his forehead. He shut his eyes and sat perfectly still for at least a minute. Then he let his hand fall to his lap.

"You are right, aren't you?" he said. He sighed heavily and reached out to touch the manuscript gingerly with his fingertips. "It's only a story, isn't it?"

He looked up at the clock on the wall.

"My God," he said. "It's the middle of the night."

He took the manuscript in his hands and stood.

"I'm sorry, Charles. I'm a fool. I can't understand how I let myself be carried away like this."

"It's all right, Aladar," I said. "You just let yourself get too wrapped up. It happens."

We said a few more things, and then I walked him to the door. He opened it and stood there, looking dejected and foolish. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Remember," I told him, "you're the boss."

He looked at me a little while.

"Sure. That's right," he said. "I'm the boss."

Then the preparation for that year's Christmas rush got underway, and I found myself up to my hips in non-books to lure the prospective festive shoppers. It is a busy season, this pre-Yule observance, and Aladar Rakas got crowded out of my mind along with everything else except the confused and frantic matters at hand. At least that is my excuse for not getting in touch with him for a good month and a half.

In the end it was he who got in touch with me. I was plowing through a manuscript we'd bought on the archaeology of ancient Egypt, wondering what the copy editor was going to say about the author's ancient use of commas, when my secretary came in to tell me that Rakas was in the outer office. I went out, covered my shock at the way he looked, and walked him back to my sanctuary. He was so thin he had become gaunt.

"It has proven more difficult than you thought," he said. "I believed you, that night, but now I am not so sure."

He had an attache case with him. He opened it and took out an enormous manuscript. He hefted it and then laid it on my desk.

"Is that the new book?" I asked.

"It is."

I squeezed its bulk, estimating the probable wordage.

"But, Aladar," I said, "the

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thing's easily three times as long as any of the others."

He smiled ironically.

"You are right, Charles," he said. "And it is not yet finished. If I go on like this I will end with a *GONE WITH THE WIND* of thrillers."

I pulled the thing to me and went through the opening pages. It was obvious he had done a lot of work on them, the changes were considerable, but the story line remained exactly the same.

"You remember the scene where the Mandarin, or Mork, or whoever it is gets in and kills the Colonel?" he asked. "Well, it keeps on happening, Charles. No matter how I rearrange the constabulary of the good Inspector Snow, no matter if I, myself, remain on the premises, even in the room, itself, it keeps on happening. The Colonel always ends up being killed by that damned cobra."

"But that's mad, Aladar."

"Yes. Possibly it is because I am going mad. I sincerely hope that is the case. I was sure of it in the beginning. But now I am not so sure. The terrible possibility is that I may be sane and the thing may actually be happening."

I looked at him with, I think, understandable confusion. Rakas lit a cigar and I began to go through the manuscript quickly, skimming, turning several pages at a time when I felt I had the direction of the action.

"It goes that way all through the book," he said. "I increase the protection. I double and redouble the guards. It is all to no avail. The Mandarin wins. Again and again, he wins."

He had a weird kind of calm this time. He even seemed to be amused at his plight. He leaned forward and pointed at the manuscript with his cigar.

"At least a dozen times in there he could have killed me, Charles. Always he lets me go. Just in the nick of time, as we say in the trade." He paused. "But this last time, I am not so sure. I think he is getting tired of the game. I think he almost decided to do me in."

I turned quickly to the end of the manuscript. I found the scene easily.

Despite the almost unendurable pain, Rakas could not move any part of his body, save his eyes. In particular, he could not move his hand. He stared at it, watching it become ever more discolored under the flickering ray from the Mandarin's machine. It felt as though a thousand burning needles were twisting in his flesh.

The cadaverous form of the Mandarin arched over him, lit by the infernal rainbow of color emanating from the device. Rakas had the momentary illusion that the creature was not flesh and blood, at all, but a kind of carved architectural device, like a gargoyle buttress in some unholy cathedral.

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"Your thoughts of rock images are most appropriate, Rakas," hissed the Mandarin, casually employing his ability to read men's minds. "Perhaps your unconscious is attempting to inform you that you, or at least your right hand, is undergoing a process unique in the history of living human flesh. It is turning into stone."

Rakas stared in horror at the greying, roughening skin of his hand. When his bulging eyes traveled back to the Mandarin he saw that the face of the evil genius was now inches from his own. He could feel fetid breath coming from the cruel slash of a mouth.

"Shall I turn you into a garden ornament now, Rakas? Or should I spare you for a time? What do you think?"

Rakas was smiling at me.

"Shall I show you my right hand, Charles?"

It had been hidden behind his attache case. He pulled it out and held it before me. It was bluish pale, and stiff.

"It is flesh, not stone," he said. "But it cannot move."

He touched the back of it with the lighted tip of his cigar.

"It cannot feel."

He removed the cigar and I saw that the flesh was still smooth and unbroken.

"It cannot burn."

He chuckled and slid his hand back behind the case.

"You see it is not as bad as in the story. Not yet. But it is getting close, is it not?"

I closed the manuscript without looking at it. Then I threw a part of my professional life out the window.

"Kill the son of a bitch," I said.

"What?"

"Kill the Mandarin. Get rid of him. End the series."

I took a deep breath.

"Look, Aladar, I'll admit the books make a nice bundle of money for us all, but to hell with them. They just aren't worth the damage they're doing to you. This hand business is awful but its explainable. You can do things like that under hypnosis. But it's a god damned frightening symptom."

I pushed the manuscript away from me. I didn't want to touch it anymore.

"I'm telling you as your editor, Aladar, that you have absolute carte blanche to slaughter the Mandarin and wrap up the whole business. As a friend, I suggest you do it quickly."

He chuckled again. It was a fair imitation of his usual one, but it didn't have the depth.

"You don't understand, do you, Charles?"

He took the manuscript back and put it into his case. He closed the case and brooded over it for a while.

"Don't you see? I am trying to kill him. Desperately."

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He looked at me and his gaze made me uncomfortable.

"With Trowbridge it was altogether different. It was a sort of chess game. Check and counter check. It was safe. Contained. But now I have removed Trowbridge, and the Mandarin is getting out. The only thing that kept that fiend in the books, I realize this now, was that blasted Englishman. Now I have killed him, and now there is nothing to stop the evil from slithering off the pages I have written."

"All right," I said. "Resurrect Evan Trowbridge. Bring him back from the dead. Conan Doyle did it with Holmes."

This time Rakas actually laughed.

"You have cited the perfect example why I cannot, Charles. Was Holmes ever really the same after Doyle killed him? No. Not except in the adventures Watson remembered from before the event. Even the most convinced Sherlockian must admit in his heart that Holmes never truly survived the tumble into the Falls."

He rapped his knuckles on the case and frowned.

"You see, Charles, that is the thing. These creatures are real. They exist. I did not create the Mandarin. I came across him. Do we ever make anything up? I doubt it. I think we only make little openings and peer through them. And openings work both ways."

He stood.

"Doyle was infinitely wiser than I. He respected what he had created. He respected the vile Moriarity. He made bloody damned sure that Holmes took the devil with him when he died. He knew that no one else, least of all himself, would have been able to stop him. And so we are presently safe from the baneful doctor. But I have loosed the Mandarin."

Then, without another word, he turned and left.

I don't know how long I sat there cursing myself for not having done something before, such as keeping in touch with Rakas after that early morning visit, before it occurred to me that sitting and cursing was hardly likely to help. I told my secretary to plead with Rakas to come back up if he decided to phone in, and then I left the office.

I figured the best possibility was that he'd head for his apartment. It was east off the park in the sixties. I knew he seldom took a cab but always walked if he had less than fifteen blocks to go. It was a good bet that he was walking now.

He might go up Fifth, and then he might cut over; there was no way of telling. I decided that a man in his state of mind would probably take the simplest route, the one that needed the least attention, so I crossed my fingers and bet on Fifth. I hurried along and when I drew abreast of the fountain in front of the Plaza, I saw

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him. He was heading into the park.

My first impulse was to dash right up to him, but then I realized I'd probably just dither, so I slowed to match his pace and tried to get myself calmed down. He needed a doctor, he needed help, and it was going to take some fancy persuading. I followed him and mulled over possible gambits.

When he got to the zoo he began to walk idly from cage to cage, looking at the animals. I stopped by a balloon and banner man and bought a box of crackerjack. It helped me blend in, and I figured the taste of the homely stuff might bring me a little closer to earth. Rakas had stopped by a lion cage and, with slow turns of his head, was watching the beast walk back and forth.

I was standing there munching my crackerjack, creating and rejecting openers, when I caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to see, or almost see, someone dart back under an archway. I stared hard at the empty place. The someone had been very squat and broad. His suit had been a kind of snake green.

I looked back to check on Rakas. He was still standing in front of the lion's cage. I backed, crabwise, to the arch, keeping one eye on it and the other on Rakas. When I reached the arch I darted through it and looked quickly to the left and right, and I got another glimpse of the squat figure.

He'd slipped around the corner of the monkey house. He'd done it so quickly I wouldn't have seen him if I hadn't been looking for him. I remembered a film strip I'd seen demonstrating the insertion of subliminal images. Just one frame, maybe two, edited in so that you weren't sure if it was something you'd really seen up there on the screen or a passing thought in your own mind.

Green clothes, ape-like, and quick as a lizard.

Mork.

The Mandarin always sent Mork on before.

Then a kid's balloon burst and he gave out a squawk of fright and I found myself standing in Central Park Zoo with a box of crackerjack in my hand.

I went back through the arch and saw that Rakas was no longer standing in front of the lion's cage. I looked in all directions, but he was nowhere to be seen. I wondered what Evan Trowbridge would have done in a situation like this, and then I shook my head and tossed the fool crackerjack into a Keep Our City Clean basket. Aladar Rakas had gone mad; it was important to remember that. He had gotten lost in his own lunatic fantasy.

I left the zoo and hurried along the path leading uptown. It was logical to assume he had gone that way. In spite of myself, I found I kept looking from side to side to

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see if I could spot Mork. Of course there were only young lovers walking, women pushing baby carriages, and old men lost in their smoking.

Then, as I stopped to catch my breath on the hill overlooking the pond where children sail their toy boats, I saw Rakas sitting on a bench. He had the manuscript open, resting on his case, and he was writing with furious speed.

I walked up to him carefully. He was absorbed in his work, and it was only when my shadow fell across the pages that he looked up and saw me.

"Charles! What are you doing here?"

"I was worried, Aladar."

"Oh?" He smiled. "That was very thoughtful of you. I am really quite touched."

He looked down at the manuscript.

"I am sorry to have left your office so rudely, Charles. But you know," he looked up at me suddenly, "just as I was leaving, I got an inspiration. A real inspiration. Sit down, please."

I did as he asked. I could see that he had several pages of close scribblings before him. He must have been writing at an incredible speed.

"I think I have figured out a way to get him, Charles. I really believe I know how to get the necessary leverage."

He smiled at me benignly.

"How do you propose to do it, Aladar?"

"Drag him out ahead of schedule. Manifest him before he is strong!"

I only looked at him blankly, but he was far too excited to notice.

"The Mandarin has been trying to get out, you see, attempting to push his way into life. He has been, you might say, pursuing me into existence. Well, I am going to fool him. I am going to turn and face him and pull him, willy-nilly, into reality. That should put him off his balance!"

He grinned and waved at the scene about us.

"I am going to write him into this actual location, Charles. And on my own terms!"

He rubbed his left hand over his stiff, pale right hand and cackled to himself.

"I began writing it, not on paper, but writing it nevertheless, while at the zoo, watching a lion prowl in his cage. I decided I would begin with Mork. I would not break the tradition of the stories. I had Mork pick up my trail there. I had him follow me," he pointed, "along that path."

I looked back at the path. It was, oddly enough, empty. Only dry leaves blew along it.

"Do you see that boulder?"

I did. It stuck out of the ground like the nose of a huge, grey whale.

"At this moment Mork is hiding behind it."

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He tapped the manuscript.

"I have written it here. I have put it down in black and white. He cannot get away. He is trapped. He knows I know. It's all here."

He tapped the manuscript again.

"And now I am going to go over there and kill him, Charles."

He put the manuscript and the case on the bench beside him and then he stood. I opened my mouth, trying to think of something or other to say, but it all got stuck in my throat when I saw Rakas reach into his coat and calmly pull out the biggest revolver I had ever seen in my life. I hadn't known they made them that big. It was terrifying and, at the same time, ludicrous.

"I have been afraid for a long time now, Charles," he said. "Now wait here. I will be right back."

I sat and watched him walk over to the leaning rock. His black coat fluttered about him and the leaves swirled where he walked. He reached the rock, held the revolver straight before him, and walked out of sight.

I waited for the sound of the shot, but it never came. Eventually I stood and followed him. My legs felt rubbery. When I got to the rock I had to lean on it for support. I felt my way around the rock to its other side and saw him lying on the ground, partially covered with a drift of dirty city leaves. He looked up at me.

"How stupid," he said. "I couldn't bring myself to kill him."

Then he closed his eyes. I bent down, close to him. A thick, dark rivulet of blood ran from one of his ears. I brushed through the leaves until I found the revolver, and then I lifted it with both hands. I stood and walked around the rock and looked back toward the bench.

The Mandarin stood there, weirdly tall and thin, like the statue of a mourning angel in a graveyard. He held the manuscript clutched to his breast. Leaves scudded and broke at his feet. I began walking toward him.

"Not yet, you don't," I said.

I came closer.

"The manuscript isn't finished," I said, "not even if the author's dead."

I was closer. His eyes caught the grey autumn light and glinted.

"I'm the editor," I said. "It's my job, it's my right, to see that the book is properly finished. That's the way it's done."

A leaf blew through the figure's head. I was very close. I could see the long nails on his fingers.

I dropped the gun and held out my hands.

"That's the way it's done," I said.

And then I held the manuscript.

I turned away. Some playing children had discovered Rakas and they were shouting excitedly. I put the book into the case and took it away.

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Now this, what I have written, is part of the book. I have added it to Rakas' terminal scribblings and now I am going to finish the book.

I have selected this place carefully. It is miles from any other habitation. Its destruction will not endanger any bystander.

I have soaked the walls and floors with gasoline. I have piled rags around my desk and the chair facing my desk and they are also saturated with it. Everything in this room is wet except for the folder of matches which lies beside me within easy reach. The matches are dry and ready.

Aladar Rakas discovered the Mandarin, but he couldn't quite believe in him. Even at the end he was unable to convince himself that such evil could really exist. He was too civilized a man. Too kindly and too generous.

But I am different. I have seen Rakas in the leaves and I, like Evan Trowbridge, believe in evil.

And I, like Evan Trowbridge and unlike Aladar Rakas, believe in and respect the power of the Mandarin. The devil may know what vile knowledge coils in that huge and unnaturally ancient brain, but I have only the faintest of glimmerings. I know only enough to realize that there is no question of my outwitting the monster.

I will attempt no subtleties. I will use the power I have as author to bring him here, and then I shall destroy everything, the entire hideous fabric of the pattern which made this situation possible. The book, the author and the creature spawned—all shall be burned cleanly away.

Now I am going to finish the book.

He is outside the door, now. He does not want to be but he must because I am writing it.

Now he has put his hand on the latch. Now he is opening the door. Now he stands there, in the twilight, looking at me with hatred in his eyes. That hatred takes a hater like myself to meet it.

He is here. Really and truly here. Not a near phantom, like the last time, but a solid, breathing being.

He is moving forward carefully, stepping high to avoid the soaked rags, but gasoline stains the hem of his grey, silken robe all the same.

Now he sits and glares at me.

He cannot move. He cannot budge, try as he may.

His eyes glow. They shimmer like fire seen through honey.

He cannot move.

Now I have lit a match and set the pack aflame.

He cannot

I hope I shall never forget the extraordinary expression of astonishment on Charles Pearl's face when he realized he had committed suicide to no purpose.

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He remained conscious for a remarkable period of time, considering the damage the fire was doing him, staring at me with utter disbelief as I gathered up the manuscript, including this last page torn from his typewriter.

The idiot had discovered Evan Trowbridge's strength, which was implacable hatred, but he had shared, and therefore missed altogether, his weakness, which was a lack of sufficient imagination.

Trowbridge always failed to bring me down altogether because he never quite managed to foresee the final trick of my science, the last fantastic ingenuity, the climactic trapdoor.

It would never have occurred to him, for instance, that I can live invulnerable in a pool of fire.

And so I, the hero of the series all along, have the opportunity to bring this final volume to, it pleases me to say, a happy ending.

Coming next month

Look closely at the small print under this month's table of contents, and you'll notice that the December 1967 issue is numbered 199. Next month will mark our 200th issue, a milestone which we think is certainly deserving of some small celebration. A proposal to fly staff and subscribers to Acapulco for a weekend has been temporarily shelved. (We are told that the weather is uncertain.) Instead, we plan to stick around and assemble a 200th issue that will offer you all the extra-special reading pleasure we can manage. Including Richard McKenna's THEY ARE NOT ROBBED, **a powerful story with a totally original concept of alien "invasion." Including a wild adventure-horror-humor piece by Robert Sheckley and Harlan Ellison.** Its title is I SEE A MAN SITTING ON A CHAIR, AND THE CHAIR IS BITING HIS LEG, **and it is the incredible story of what the post-World War III goo did to Joe Pareti. Harry Harrison, Fritz Leiber and Lloyd Biggle, Jr. will be on hand with three fine short tales, and we will also be offering a truly exceptional story by Sonya Dorman called** LUNATIC ASSIGNMENT. **Number 200 goes on sale November 30.**

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SCIENCE

THE FIRST METAL

by Isaac Asimov

I AM SOMETIMES ASKED HOW I DECIDE ON the subject for an article. The answer is clear and straightforward: I don't know.

Sometimes, though, I do happen to catch a fugitive glimpse of the mental processes involved before they whiff away and depart forever.

Thus, several weeks ago, I came across some comments in a chemistry journal concerning the metal gallium. This is an interesting metal on two counts. It played a melodramatic role in the working out of the periodic table, and it has a very interesting melting point.

That gave rise to the possibility of an article on the periodic table or, alternatively, to one on melting points of metals. For a few moments, I speculated idly on what could be done with melting points. It seemed to me that if I were going to discuss the melting point of gallium, I would first have to discuss the melting point of mercury.

And if I discussed the melting point of mercury, I would have to mention a few other things about it, notably the fact that it was one of the seven metals known to the ancients.

In that case, how about an article, first, on the ancient metals. And that is what I am now sitting down to write, intending to work my way up to mercury, and then to gallium.

That is how I decide on subjects to write about—at least, in this case.

The seven metals known to the ancients were (in alphabetical order): copper, gold, iron, lead, mercury, silver and tin. The discovery of each of these is lost in the mists of the past, but I strongly suspect it was gold that was discovered first. It was gold that was the first metal.

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Why not? Gold can occasionally be found as a glittering little nugget. Its bright and beautiful yellow color would easily attract the eye, and it would be a natural ornament.

Once handled, gold would almost at once show itself to be a remarkable substance, much different from the rock, wood and bone that mankind had been working with for hundreds of thousands of years. Not only would it have a shiny color, but it would be considerably heavier than an ordinary pebble of the same size.

Then, too, suppose the finder wished to work the nugget into a more symmetrical shape. To shape a stone, he would make use of careful strokes with a stone chisel. Flakes of thin stone would split off the object being shaped.

The gold would not behave in this manner. The chisel would merely make a dent in the gold. If the gold were beaten with a mallet, the metal would not powder as a pebble would; it would flatten into a very thin sheet. It could also be drawn out into a very fine wire, which stone certainly could not be.

Other metals were eventually discovered; other objects which had luster and unusual weight and which were malleable and ductile. None were as good as gold, though. None were as beautiful, or as heavy. What's more, other metals tended to lose their shine more or less quickly if exposed to air over periods of time; gold never did.

And gold had another property which added to its value; it was rare. This was true of the other metals, too. The earth's crust is primarily rock, and the occasional metal nugget was occasional indeed. The very word "metal" seems to come from the Greek word "metallan," meaning "to search for," a tribute both to its rarity and desirability.

Modern chemists have worked out the composition of the Earth's crust in terms of each of the various elements, including the seven ancient metals. Here are the figures for the seven, given in grams of metal per tons of Earth's crust, and in order of decreasing concentration.

Metal	*Concentration (g/ton)*
Iron	50,000
Copper	80
Lead	15
Tin	3
Mercury	0.5
Silver	0.1
Gold	0.005

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As you see, gold is by far the rarest of the seven metals. A concentration of 0.005 g/ton is equivalent to one part in two hundred million.

Still, the total quantity of gold is sizable if one considers the entire crust. At this percentage, the total mass of gold in the crust is about 155 billion tons.

There is gold in the ocean, too, in the form of submicroscopic metallic fragments, which comes to a concentration of 0.000005 grams per ton, making a total gold mass in the oceans of nearly 9 million tons.

The gold in the ocean is so dilute that it cannot yet be extracted at anything but a large loss. Therefore no gold has ever been extracted from the ocean. The soil has a larger concentration of gold, but the soil is harder to work with. If gold were evenly spread throughout the crust, that gold, too, would be unavailable to us.

But the gold is not evenly spread. There are occasional accessible regions where the gold content is high enough to be mined profitably, even with primitive equipment, and where reasonably pure metallic gold can sometimes be found in sizable nuggets.

But only a tiny fraction of all the gold is thus made available. Nothing has been so avidly searched for as gold through all six thousand years of civilized history; yet with all that search it is estimated that the total amount of gold extracted from the ground by mankind amounts to only 50,000 tons. What's more, the world's mines are producing gold at the rate of only about a thousand tons a year (half of it in South Africa) and yet the end of Earth's reserves of minable gold seems to be in sight.

It would be interesting to see how small a quantity of gold has served to affect human history in so enormous a way. If all the gold so far extracted from the Earth were packed into a cube, that cube would be 290 feet on each side. If all that gold were used to plate an area the size of Manhattan island, the layer of gold would only be about 1 millimeter thick. (That puts another view on the old immigrant notion that the streets of New York are paved with gold. It would have to be, at best, an awfully thin pavement.)

The question then arises as to why gold should have been the first metal to be discovered if it were the rarest of the seven.

The answer lies in the comparative activity of the metals, their comparative tendency to combine with other elements to form nonmetallic compounds.

The activity of metals can be measured as "oxidation potential" in volts (because electric currents can make metallic atoms plate out as

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free metals or go into solution as ions). The element hydrogen (which has some metallic properties from a chemical standpoint) is arbitrarily given an oxidation potential of 0.0 volts. Elements which are more active than hydrogen have a positive oxidation potential; those less active, a negative one.

Here, then, are the oxidation potentials for the seven ancient metals:

Metal	*Oxidation Potential (volts)*
Iron	+0.44
Tin	+0.14
Lead	+0.13
Copper	−0.34
Mercury	−0.79
Silver	−0.80
Gold	−1.50

As you see, gold is by far the least active of the seven metals and is therefore by far the most likely to exist in free metallic form. Thus, gold is far less common than iron, atom by atom, but gold nuggets are far more common than iron nuggets. Indeed, but for one factor which I will come to soon, iron nuggets would not be found at all. Furthermore, the yellow gleam of gold is much more likely to be noticed than the dirty gray or black of iron.

So it happens that while silver and copper objects (also among the more inactive metals) can be found in predynastic Egyptian tombs dating as far back as 4000 B.C., gold objects, it is thought, antedate that mark by several centuries.

In early Egyptian history, silver was more expensive than gold, simply because it was rarer in nugget form.

Indeed, we might generalize that the ancient metals are the inert metals. Yet we are bound to ask, then, if there were any inert metals *not* known to the ancients. The answer is: Yes.

There are six metals of the "platinum group"—platinum itself, then palladium, rhodium, ruthenium, osmium and iridium—that should qualify. Platinum, osmium and iridium are somewhat more inert than gold, even, and the others are at least as inactive as silver. Why, then, were they not known to the ancients?

It is tempting to blame it on the rarity of the metals. Four of them: ruthenium, rhodium, osmium and iridium, are considerably rarer even than gold, with concentrations in the crust of only 0.001 g/ton. They, along with rhenium, have the distinction of being the least common

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metals on Earth. (Rhenium has the unique distinction of being the last stable element to be discovered—but that is another story.)

Yet platinum is as common as gold and palladium twice as common. If gold nuggets can be found, then, why not nuggets of platinum? Or palladium?

For one thing, yellow gold is far more noticeable than white platinum. For another, the best platinum ores are located nowhere near the ancient sites of civilization in the Middle East.

Then, too, I rather suspect that platinum nuggets were indeed found now and then—and mistaken for silver. Platinum is far less malleable than silver and is not easily worked. I can see the primitive metal-worker looking at such nuggets in disgust and muttering "spoiled silver" as he tosses them away.

The apparent resemblance to silver marks platinum to this day. It was first clearly recognized as a distinct metal in 1748, when a Spanish chemist, Don Antonio de Ulloa, described samples of the metal which he had located in the course of his travels through South America. He named it "platina" from "plata," the Spanish word for silver. So platinum remains forever (at least in name) a kind of silver.

Nor is it surprising, in view of all this, that iron, by far the most common of the seven metals—five hundred times as common as all the remaining six put together—lagged in some ways behind the rest. After all, it was the most active of the ancient metals, the most apt to be in combination, the most difficult to loose from that combination.

That it was known at all may have been the result of a cosmic catastrophe millions of miles from Earth.

After all, as far as chemical principles are concerned, iron should occur on Earth only in the form of non-metallic compounds, never as the free metal. Yet that's not the way it is.

You see, there is so much iron on Earth, and it is so concentrated toward the center, that one-third of the mass of the planet is a liquid core of iron plus its sister metal, nickel, in a ten-to-one ratio (see RECIPE FOR A PLANET, *F & SF*, July 1961).

In itself, this doesn't affect Earth's crust, but there must be other planets with such a nickel-iron core, and it seems that one of them has exploded. (The one, presumably, between Mars and Jupiter, the orbit of which is now marked by the asteroids, the fragments of that explosion.) The smaller fragments of that explosion bombard the earth, and some of them are the fragments of the nickel-iron core. If the fragment is large enough, it survives the friction of the atmosphere and strikes the crust, where it lodges as heaven-born "nuggets" of iron.

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Small pieces of nickel-iron (undoubtedly meteoric in origin) are found in Egyptian tombs dating back to 3500 B.C. They are there in the guise of jewelry.

As long as metals could only be used when found as nuggets, they were bound to be excessively rare, but some time before 3500 B.C. the true discovery of metals was made. Any fool, after all, could stumble across a nugget. It took a man, however, to recognize what had happened when copper nuggets were found in the ashes of a fire that had been built on a blue stone.

It was a daring thought that from rock one might gain metal.

The science of metallurgy began, and men began to look not for metal only, but for metal ores; for rocks that, on heating in a wood fire, would yield metal.

It was copper that was chiefly produced in this manner, and it became the wonder metal of the age. It was 16,000 times as common as gold, once the ores were taken into account. And though it did occur as rock-like compounds in the ore, it was not so active as to be tightly bound in those compounds. A gentle nudge, chemically speaking, would suffice to pry the copper loose.

Copper alone was suitable merely for ornaments and for some utensils —too soft for anything else. But then another accidental discovery must have been made. Tin ores could be handled much as copper ores were, and if some ores contained both copper and tin, the mixed metal ("alloy") that resulted was much harder and tougher than copper alone. We call the alloy "bronze." The ancients learned to mix copper and tin on purpose and to use it for war-weapons. Thus was initiated the Bronze Age. In the Middle East, the site of man's oldest civilizations, the Bronze Age began about 3500 B.C. and endured for something over two thousand years.

Tin was the bottleneck here. It is only 1/25 as common as copper, and the tin reserves of the Middle East ran out while copper was still available in comfortable amounts. As a result, the far-distant corners of the world had to be scoured for tin. The Phoenician navigators, the best and most daring of the ancient world, made their way out to the "Tin Isles" for the purpose.

The Phoenicians kept the secret of the location of the Tin Isles throughout their history, but it seems quite certain that they were sailing out into the Atlantic Ocean and northward to Cornwall, on the southwestern extremity of the island of Great Britain.

Cornwall is one of the few regions of the Earth which is rich in tin ore. In twenty-five centuries of steady mining, some three million tons

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of tin have been removed from the Cornish mines, and the area is not yet exhausted. Nevertheless, its output these days is minute compared to those of the relatively untapped mines of Malaya, Indonesia, and Bolivia.

Yet even while bronze was carrying all before it, the ancients knew very well that there was a metal that was harder and tougher than bronze and potentially much better for war-weapons and tools. It was iron—those metallic lumps that were picked up now and then, a very rare now and then.

There were, of course, iron ores, just as there were copper ores, and tin ores. Indeed, it was obvious that iron ores were extremely common. The trouble was that iron (much more active than copper) held on to its place in the compound firmly. The techniques that sufficed to extract metallic copper would not do for iron. Such iron as was coaxed out of the ore was riddled with gas bubbles, brittle, and good for nothing.

Special techniques involving particularly hot flames were needed, along with a high quality of charcoal. Even when temperatures were reached that sufficed to melt the iron and drive out the bubbles and, indeed, prepare it in pure form, the end-product was disappointing. Iron obtained from ore was not nearly as hard as the meteoric nuggets, and it did not hold nearly as fine an edge. The trouble was that meteoric iron contained nickel (a metal unknown to the ancients).

But then processes were developed that produced iron into which some carbon from the charcoal was introduced. In effect, a kind of steel was produced and that, at last, was the metal that was needed.

It was some time about 1500 B.C. that the secret of producing good iron in useful quantities was developed somewhere in the southern foothills of the Caucasian mountains. This was in what was known as the kingdom of Urartu (the "Ararat" where Noah's Ark landed). The area was, at the time, under the control of the Hittites, whose power center was in eastern Asia Minor. The Hittite kingdom tried to keep knowledge of the new technique a monopoly, but the exploitation of this new weapon was slow. Before the Hittites could really turn the metal into a world-beating military resource, they were themselves beaten by a combination of civil war and invasion from without.

The fall of the Hittites came soon after 1200 B.C., and the secret of iron technology fell to Assyria, the land just south of Urartu. Gradually, the Assyrians developed iron to an unprecedented extent, and by 800 B.C. they were putting a completely iron-ized army into the field. They stockpiled iron ingots as we stockpile uranium and for the same pur-

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pose. For two hundred years, the Assyrians swept all before them and built the greatest empire the Middle East had yet seen.—Until their victims learned iron technology for themselves.

It is interesting to note, by the way, that iron, despite its commonness, is not the most common metal on Earth. There is one metal more common, but also more active. In consequence, it lagged even farther behind in development.

The most common metal in Earth's crust is aluminum, the concentration of which is 81,300 g/ton. It is 1.6 times as common as iron, but its oxidation potential is +1.66, which is considerably higher than even that of iron.

This means that the tendency of aluminum to form compounds is still greater than that of iron, and that it is much more difficult to force aluminum out of those compounds than it is to force iron out of its compounds. Moreover, no aluminum nuggets fell from the sky to hint to mankind that such an element exists.

As a result, aluminum remained completely unknown (as a free metal) to the ancients. It wasn't until 1825 that the first piece of aluminum metal (quite impure) was forced out of a compound by the Danish chemist, Hans Christian Oersted. And it wasn't till 1886 that a good method was discovered for producing the pure metal cheaply and in quantity. (That's another story, too.)

Metals, generally, are denser than stone. If we measure density in ounces per cubic inch, we find that:

Metal	*Density (ounces/cubic inch)*
Tin	4.2
Iron	4.6
Copper	5.2
Silver	6.1
Lead	6.6
Mercury	7.9
Gold	11.3

Since the typical rock has a density of about 1.6 ounces per cubic inch, even the least dense of the seven metals is 2.5 times as dense as rock; while gold is about seven times as dense.

High density has its uses. If you wish to pack a lot of weight into a small volume, you would use metal rather than stone; the denser the metal the better. Gold is the best in this respect, but no one is going to

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use gold as routine ballast; it *is* too valuable. Mercury, being liquid, would be too hard to handle.

That leaves lead as a third choice. It is relatively cheap, for a metal, and it is four times as dense as rock. Lead, therefore, became the representative of heaviness. The phrase "heavy as lead" has entered the language as a cliché which has much more force, through sheer repetition, than the phrases "heavy as gold" or "heavy as platinum." (We mean "dense" rather than "heavy," but never mind.)

Again, we speak of "leaden eyelids" to imply sleepiness that can't be fought off; "leaden steps" to indicate a walk made slow and difficult by the weight of weariness or sorrow.

To force a line to hang vertically, one would want to put a weight at one end, so that the force of gravity would stretch the line straight up and down. A lump of lead would be a compact way of supplying the weight.

The Latin word for "lead" is "plumbum," and now you can see what a "plumb line" must be. Since you would attach a piece of lead to a line you wanted to throw into the ocean and have sink as far as possible, you see what "to plumb the depths" means.

Again, since the ancients believed that the heavier an object the faster it fell, it seemed to them that a lead weight would fall faster than the same-sized weight made of other less dense materials. So you see what "to plummet downward" means.

Finally, since a lead weight makes a line *completely* vertical, there grew to be a tie-in between lead and completeness, so that now you see why, in a Western movie, the old rancher says to the young schoolmarm, "By dogies, Ah'm shore plumb tuckered out, missie." (At least you know why he says it if you know what the other words mean.)

All this remains, even though, in addition to gold and mercury, six other metals, now known, are denser than lead. Three of these newcomers, platinum, osmium, and iridium, are denser, even, than gold. Osmium has a density of 13.1 ounces per cubic inch, and the other two are not far behind.

One more point. Metals, generally, are lower-melting than most rocks. Rocks melt, in general, at temperatures of 1800 to 2000° C. This is high enough to allow rocky materials to be used to construct furnaces and chimneys.

Here are the melting points of the seven ancient metals:

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Metal	*Melting Point (°C.)*
Iron	1535
Copper	1083
Gold	1063
Silver	961
Lead	327
Tin	232
Mercury	—39

Iron has quite a high melting-point for a metal, which is one of the reasons it was a hard nut, metallurgically, for the ancients to crack. Copper, silver and gold are in the intermediate range, but look at lead and tin.

Lead and tin are easy to melt in any ordinary flame, and a mixture of the two will melt at lower temperatures than either separately, temperatures as low as 183° C. Such an alloy of tin and lead is "solder." It can be easily melted, poured onto the joint between two pieces of metal and allowed to freeze.

Tin containing a little lead is "pewter." Kings and nabobs used gold and silver plates to eat from, despite their expense and difficulty of working, out of a sense of conspicuous consumption. Poor people used clay and wood, which were ugly. In between, there were pewter dishes.

It was particularly easy to work either tin or lead into tubes, and there is a tale to tell about each. Ordinary metallic "white tin" is stable only at relatively warm temperatures. In winter cold there begins to be a tendency for it to turn into a crumbly non-metallic "gray tin." This takes place slowly unless temperatures considerably below zero are reached.

A cathedral at St. Petersburg, Russia, installed a magnificent organ, with beautiful tin pipes. Came a cold, cold winter and the pipes disintegrated. That's how chemists discovered about white tin and gray tin, but I doubt that the cathedral personnel were particularly overjoyed at their contribution to scientific knowledge.

It is all very well to build organ pipes out of tin, but for ordinary plebeian water pipes, tin was too expensive. The other low-melting metal, lead, was used. In those parts of the Roman Empire where a central water supply was set up (in the city of Rome itself, for instance) lead pipes were used. —And now you know why we call the fellow who deals with water pipes a "plumber," even though the pipes are no longer made of lead.

As it happens, and as the Romans did not know, lead compounds

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are strongly and cumulatively poisonous. Under certain conditions, small quantities of the lead pipe would dissolve and the water supply would become dangerous over longish periods.

There are even some who have recently suggested that the Roman Empire fell, in part at least, because key men of the government and social leadership in the city of Rome were suffering from "plumbism," that is, from chronic lead poisoning.

But neither silver nor lead is the lowest-melting of the seven ancient metals. That record was held (and is still held today) by mercury—and that brings us back one step in the chain of rumination I described at the start of this article.

Mercury will be the subject next month.

ASIMOV AND BRADBURY SPECIAL ISSUES

We have a limited supply of the two special issues devoted to Ray Bradbury (May 1963) and Isaac Asimov (October 1966). Copies are available for $1.00 each from Mercury Press, Box 271, Rockville Centre, N. Y. 11571.

Special Bradbury Issue: Containing two stories by Ray Bradbury, "Bright Phoenix" and "To the Chicago Abyss," a profile by William F. Nolan, and an index of Bradbury's work. Cover by Joe Mugnaini.

Special Asimov Issue: Including "The Key," a novelet by Isaac Asimov, a profile by L. Sprague de Camp, an index of Asimov's work, and an article by Dr. Asimov on his beginnings as a writer. Cover by Ed Emsh.

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Leonard Tushnet's first appearance in F&SF was in August 1964 with IN THE CALENDAR OF SAINTS, *a story about Polish peasantry, politics, and the Devil. Here, he makes a welcome reappearance with a good-humored short about what happens when chelmlins (who are exactly unlike the ill-humored gremlins of American folklore) emigrate from Poland to America.*

THE CHELMLINS

by Leonard Tushnet

A CHELMLIN IS JUST LIKE A gremlin, only completely different. A gremlin is the one who makes whatever can go wrong go wrong; a chelmlin keeps a shlemiel (who by nature does things wrong) from becoming a shlimazel. That is, he keeps the dumb ox from the slaughter. You know about Chelm, that wonderful town in Poland where the angel dropped a bag of foolish souls being taken back to Paradise for repair? That was the place where the townspeople dug a pit for the dirt they removed from the foundation for their new synagogue; the place where they stocked the fish pond with salted herring; the place where they built a high brick wall around the town to keep out the cold in winter.

The people of Chelm were simpletons, notorious for their stupidity wherever Jews lived, although the Chelmites themselves said that it was not that they were foolish, it was just that foolish things happened to them. Of course, such fools could not have long existed had not the Master of the Universe, in pity for these poor specimens of His Chosen People, created the chelmlins to watch over them to keep them from the consequences of their folly. The chelmlins made it possible for them to survive. The chelmlins made their most outrageous enterprises prosper. For instance, if they made bricks and didn't light the ovens because the

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summer was too hot, the chelmlins baked the bricks in the sun. The only adobe synagogue in all of Europe was in Chelm. Another example—they made cart wheels out of stone so they would last longer; the neighboring peasants bought them all to use as grindstones.

This was years ago, of course. Hitler (may his name be blotted out!) saw to it that Chelm became a death camp, and out of the two thousand inhabitants of that town only six remained, and in time those six emigrated one by one from various D.P. camps to America, accompanied by the chelmlins, of course. Even in America, the chelmlins looked after them. Meyer Fischer, as a matter of fact, became a very important person in Hollywood. He made $30,000 a year (which he used, as was befitting, to support the other five) being a consultant, you could call it, in epic pictures. He was in great demand. He was insurance. Every producer knew that without Meyer taking a small role as an extra or a bit player there was sure to be, despite the most careful supervision by script girls and assistant directors, some anachronism. A bored Christian in the catacombs would light a cigarette; a Crusader would look at his wristwatch; a Restoration beauty would zip up her dress. But with Meyer in the picture the producer could be certain that where he was would be the slip-up. All that was necessary was to cut out Meyer's scene, and the critics would have nothing to carp at.

Meyer lived in luxury beyond his wildest dreams. Every morning he had a fried herring, every noon boiled potatoes and sour cream, every night roast chicken with noodles and gravy. In spite of his exalted position Meyer remained a pious Jew. He wound his phylacteries and said his prayers and gave to charity. His only complaint was that he could not give enough, not (it must be admitted) that he was so philanthropic but rather that he (vainglorious man!) liked to see his name at the top of the donor lists.

He cast about, therefore, for ways to increase his income. He became an investor in inventions, none of which, not being an original Chelmite idea, had any worth. Instead of becoming richer, he became poorer, a fact which he and his countrymen took for granted as their fated destiny.

One thing could be said for the men of Chelm. They were generous; they forgave their fellow creatures their faults. They did not criticize Meyer, although they suffered through his investments; rather, they looked for ways to help him. Edward Everett, the youngest and most Americanized (his name was formerly Ezra Elimelech), had an inspiration. "I have been reading in the papers"—he was the official reader for the group—"about a big corporation here in Califor-

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nia, called RAND or SAND or LAND. It makes no difference what, it's a heathen name anyway. The people who work there sit around all day and think up ways to make money. They invent and test and then they sell their ideas to the government or to big manufacturers, and that way they make a good living."

"Just for thinking they get paid?" His companions were incredulous, and they fell silent, twisting their earlocks as though they were musing on a difficult passage in the Talmud, for even in America they followed the customs of their forefathers. They were not conspicuous, however; they looked like the local hippies.

After much thinking and more discussion, the five prevailed upon Meyer to join them. They formed a corporation called HEHE, from the initials of the Hebrew words for Brotherhood of Chelm. Then they sat down to think.

They thought and thought, not an easy job for the men of Chelm. Sweat poured down their foreheads, their eyes smarted, their heads ached from so much thinking. They met early in the morning and sat around the pool at Meyer's house (what house in California has no pool?) until late at night when they were driven indoors by the insects swarming around the electric light bulbs.

That was what gave Edward Everett the first idea. "Listen, brothers," he said, "why don't we make big bubbles out of plastic to fit over the electric light bulbs so bugs won't come to them. Bugs are attracted by the light, everyone knows, so let us make black bubbles and the bugs won't see the light."

"Brilliant! A genius! Another Edison!" Acclaim was general. HEHE pooled the resources of its members, got a manufacturer to make thousands of the black plastic bubbles,—and then discovered that no one wanted insect-free non-illumination. Here the chelmlins took over. A toy merchant bought the entire stock (at a profit for HEHE, it goes without saying), made eye holes in the bubbles, and marketed them as children's space pirate helmets.

HEHE met, looked at the bankbooks, and immediately sat down to think up another invention.

In less than a week they had it. Striped paint. That's right. Striped paint. "Why didn't anybody think of that before?" they asked each other. "Just think. A painter dips his brush in a can and without measuring he can paint stripes on a wall." Once the idea was thought of, the technical details were easy. Enthusiastic, Meyer wanted to start with all the colors of the rainbow, but the others, more cautious, voted him down. "Remember," they warned him, "in America they don't do things in such a rush. First you have a pushcart, *then* you open a department store."

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They emptied the water out of the pool. It wasn't used for swimming, anyway; the six went regularly to the steam baths. They poured in black paint ("no question black is heavier than white, all you have to do is look at it"), then a thin layer of glass beads suspended in oil ("to keep the layers apart, a plain glass sheet would be better but who would be such a fool as to use that?"), then a layer of white paint; layer by layer the pool was filled. Suddenly Meyer clapped his hand to his head. "Brothers!" he exclaimed. "We have made an error! The pool slopes from one end to the other. The stripes will be uneven!" Edward Everett calmed him down. "Easily corrected," he said. "We'll push the paint from the deep end to the shallow, and then back again so there will be an even distribution of black and white." They did so with heavy paddles, luckily ending their task just as the sun went down, for the next day was Saturday. They went to evening prayers and spent the whole of the Sabbath in the synagogue, as decent people should.

On Sunday morning they met at the pool-side. "Woe is me!" Meyer cried, pointing. "Brothers, see what has happened!" All the oil had floated to the top; it lay there, yellow and redolent. They peered into the pool. Below the oil they made out the paint, but it seemed neither black nor white. Nothing daunts a real Chelmite. Carefully, they skimmed off the oil with buckets, like a housewife skimming soup. Prudently, they emptied the oil into barrels; no sense wasting it, it could be used again. Filled with dismay, they saw their finished product—glistening gray paint.

The chelmlins were at hand. The oil was sold back to the wholesaler—at a loss, being secondhand. But the paint, that beautiful gray paint with the millions of glass beads suspended in it, they sold to the county for painting the guard rails on the freeways. At night the headlights of the cars were reflected in the tiny beads and were an effective safety device.

Flushed with success, HEHE held a meeting. "Now what?" asked Meyer. "Let's get started."

"Sha!" Edward Everett replied. "Not so fast. We have just begun. Now we move into big business." The others looked at him inquiringly. He ticked off the points on his fingers as though he were explaining a passage from the Torah. "What's always being advertised on television? Soap. And what do they say about soap? It's pure. And what does pure mean? Made from the finest ingredients. For such programs the soap companies must be paying a lot of money, which means that they are making a lot of money, and if they can do it, why can't we? Let us make the purest soap of all, and all America will buy it." Applause. "But first we must read books on how to make

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soap. Otherwise we'd be fools."

Unfortunately reading books did not help much. Only Jeremiah mentioned soap, and he gave no directions on how to make it; neither did the exegetists. The Chelmites had to rely on Gentile information as relayed by Edward Everett. "Soap," he declaimed, "is made from boiling caustic soda with fats, separating out the glycerin, and refining what's left. Now, caustic soda is caustic soda. It's a plain chemical and there's no problem about its being pure. But the fats—there's the problem. What is the best and purest fat there is?"

"Schmaltz! Chicken fat!" Everyone looked with admiration at Meyer. "What could be purer than chicken fat?" Memories of the golden ambrosia made their mouths water.

They wasted no time. They bought enormous aluminum pots, gallons of chicken fat, drums of caustic soda. They built a fire in the unused barbecue pit and set the pots over it. They heated the chicken fat until it was a transparent liquid, and then added the caustic soda slowly. They stirred the mixture and kept it boiling. The stench was abominable, but Chelmites are used to foul odors, and they didn't mind it. They stirred and poured and boiled until the mixture got as thick as second-day barley soup and as brown as kasha porridge. The result was not what they had expected.

By this time so many complaints had come in from the neighbors that a city inspector came to investigate. He heard what they had done, lifted some of the sticky mess out on a paddle, and roared with laughter. "My good fellows," he said (seeing that they had acted not out of cupidity but out of ignorance, he was polite), "you have indeed made a soap, but the caustic soda has reacted with the aluminum of the pots, and you have made a non-soluble soap, worthless for washing." He went away chuckling.

Again the chelmlins stepped in. The inspector told the story to his colleagues; one of them told it to his brother-in-law, who worked for a government procurement agency; he told it in turn to his superior. In short, the HEHE corporation sold the mixture to the United States Navy as a waterproof lubricating grease, certified 100% pure. In celebration they had a great feast, with stuffed derma, chicken soup, potted brisket, potato pudding, honey-sweetened carrots, sponge cake, and sweet red wine.

Triumph followed triumph, each disaster being turned into a brilliant coup by the chelmlins, who found a use and buyers for indestructible disposable napkins, for totally unopenable burglar-proof safes, for leak-proof fishing nets. The corporation's capital grew by leaps and bounds, as did its contributions to charity. But the con-

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tributions were all deductible from the income tax, so that Chelmites were free to indulge themselves in malted milks, silk prayer shawls, and embroidered skull-caps. As a matter of fact, they were well on the way to becoming smug all-rightniks.

Now the chelmlins, although not human, had associated with humans for so long that they had taken on some of their attributes. They were annoyed that the Chelmites took all the credit for being astute businessmen, if not such sharp inventors. They appeared before the Throne with a complaint. "O Master of the Universe! For hundreds of years we have done Your bidding and guarded the men of Chelm as You ordered. But now they have grown fat and slick. They have become proud and find themselves good in their own sight. Release us, Lord, from our obligations, we petition You."

Not without reason is it called the Mercy Seat. The chelmlins were assigned to other duties of the same nature, there being no shortage of wise fools in this world. They now work in the Chancelleries and State Departments and Foreign Ministries of the nations, seeing that ultimatums are lost and that warlike speeches are mistranslated.

But the men of Chelm were not completely dropped from the protection of the Almighty. It was seen to that the HEHE Corporation, on the basis of its successful operations, was absorbed by one of the West Coast technologic giants. The latter lost nothing; a little judicious leaking of the news that it had made another acquisition sent its stock soaring. Meyer and Edward Everett and the other four are now executives with fine offices and private secretaries almost as good as chelmlins. Praised be the Lord, for His mercy endureth forever!

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From the inventive J. G. Ballard comes this month's cover story, a haunting tale of three men who soar in gliders to the clouds and carve them into likenesses of sea-horses and unicorns, lizards and exotic birds, and, finally and tragically, into the portrait of an insane woman.

THE CLOUD-SCULPTORS OF CORAL D

by J. G. Ballard

ALL SUMMER THE CLOUD-sculptors would come from Vermilion Sands and sail their painted gliders above the coral towers that rose like white pagodas beside the highway to Lagoon West. The tallest of the towers was Coral D, and here the rising air above the sand-reefs was topped by swan-like clumps of fair-weather cumulus. Lifted on the shoulders of the air above the crown of Coral D, we would carve sea-horses and unicorns, the portraits of presidents and film-stars, lizards and exotic birds. As the crowd watched from their cars, a cool rain would fall on to the dusty roofs, weeping from the sculptured clouds as they sailed across the desert floor towards the sun.

Of all the cloud-sculptures we were to carve, the strangest were the portraits of Leonora Chanel. As I look back to that afternoon last summer when she first came in her white limousine to watch the cloud-sculptors of Coral D, I know we barely realised how seriously this beautiful but insane woman regarded the sculptures floating above her in that calm sky. Later her portraits, carved in the whirlwind, were to weep their storm-rain upon the corpses of their sculptors.

I had arrived in Vermilion Sands three months earlier. A retired pilot, I was painfully coming to terms with a broken leg and the prospect of never flying again. Driving into the desert one day, I stopped near the coral towers on the highway to Lagoon West. As I gazed at these immense pagodas stranded on the floor of this fossil sea, I heard music coming from a

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sand-reef two hundred yards away. Swinging on my crutches across the sliding sand, I found a shallow basin among the dunes where sonic statutes had run to seed beside a ruined studio. The owner had gone, abandoning the hangar-like building to the sand-rays and the desert, and on some half-formed impulse I began to drive out each afternoon. From the lathes and joists left behind I built my first giant kites and, later, gliders with cockpits. Tethered by their cables, they would hang above me in the afternoon air like amiable ciphers.

One evening, as I wound the gliders down on to the winch, a sudden gale rose over the crest of Coral D. While I grappled with the whirling handle, trying to anchor my crutches in the sand, two figures approached across the desert floor. One was a small hunchback with a child's overlit eyes and a deformed jaw twisted like an anchor barb to one side. He scuttled over to the winch and wound the tattered gliders towards the ground, his powerful shoulders pushing me aside. He helped me on to my crutches and peered into the hangar. Here my most ambitious glider to date, no longer a kite but a sail-plane with elevators and control lines, was taking shape on the bench.

He spread a large hand over his chest. "Petit Manuel—acrobat and weight-lifter. Nolan!" he bellowed. "Look at this!" His companion was squatting by the sonic statues, twisting their helixes so that their voices became more resonant. "Nolan's an artist," the hunchback confided to me. "He'll build you gliders like condors."

The tall man was wandering among the gliders, touching their wings with a sculptor's hand. His morose eyes were set in a face like a bored Gauguin's. He glanced at the plaster on my leg and my faded flying jacket, and gestured at the gliders. "You've given cockpit to them, major." The remark contained a complete understanding of my motives. He pointed to the coral towers rising above us into the evening sky. "With silver iodide we could carve the clouds."

The hunchback nodded encouragingly to me, his eyes lit by an astronomy of dreams.

So were formed the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. Although I considered myself one of them, I never flew the gliders, but I taught Nolan and little Manuel to fly, and later, when he joined us, Charles Van Eyck. Nolan had found this blond-haired pirate of the cafe terraces in Vermilion Sands, a laconic teuton with droll eyes and a weak mouth, and brought him out to Coral D when the season ended and the well-to-do tourists and their nubile daughters returned to Red Beach. "Major Parker—Charles Van Eyck. He's a head-

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hunter," Nolan commented with cold humour, "—maidenheads." Despite their uneasy rivalry I realised that Van Eyck would give our group a useful dimension of glamour.

From the first I suspected that the studio in the desert was Nolan's, and that we were all serving some private whim of this dark-haired solitary. At the time, however, I was more concerned with teaching them to fly—first on cable, mastering the updraughts that swept the stunted turret of Coral A, smallest of the towers, then the steeper slopes of B and C, and finally the powerful currents of Coral D. Late one afternoon, when I began to wind them in, Nolan cut away his line. The glider plummeted onto its back, diving down to impale itself on the rock spires. I flung myself to the ground as the cable whipped across my car, shattering the windshield. When I looked up, Nolan was soaring high in the tinted air above Coral D. The wind, guardian of the coral towers, carried him through the islands of cumulus that veiled the evening light.

As I ran to the winch, the second cable went, and little Manuel swerved away to join Nolan. Ugly crab on the ground, in the air the hunchback became a bird with immense wings, outflying both Nolan and Van Eyck. I watched them as they circled the coral towers, and then swept down together over the desert floor, stirring the sand-rays into soot-like clouds. Petit Manuel was jubilant. He strutted around me like a pocket Napoleon, contemptuous of my broken leg, scooping up handfuls of broken glass and tossing them over his head like bouquets to the air.

Two months later, as we drove out to Coral D on the day we were to meet Leonora Chanel, something of this first feeling of exhilaration had faded. Now that the season had ended few tourists travelled to Lagoon West, and often we would perform our cloud-sculpture to the empty highway. Sometimes Nolan would remain behind in his hotel, drinking by himself on the bed, or Van Eyck would disappear for several days with some widow or divorcee, and Petit Manuel and I would go out alone.

Nonetheless, as the four of us drove out in my car that afternoon and saw the clouds waiting for us above the spire of Coral D, all my depression and fatigue vanished. Ten minutes later the three cloud-gliders rose into the air and the first cars began to stop on the highway. Nolan was in the lead in his black-winged glider, climbing straight to the crown of Coral D two hundred feet above, while Van Eyck soared to and fro below, showing his blond mane to a middle-aged woman in a topaz convertible. Behind them came little

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Manuel, his candy-striped wings slipping and churning in the disturbed air. Shouting happy obscenities, he flew with his twisted knees, huge arms gesticulating out of the cockpit.

The three gliders, brilliant painted toys, revolved like lazing birds above Coral D, waiting for the first clouds to pass overhead. Van Eyck moved away to take a cloud. He sailed around its white pillow, spraying the sides with iodide crystals and cutting away the flock-like tissue. The steaming shards fell towards us like crumbling ice-drifts. As the drops of condensing spray fell on my face, I could see Van Eyck shaping an immense horse's head. He sailed up and down the long forehead and chiselled out the eyes and ears.

As always, the people watching from their cars seemed to enjoy this piece of aerial marzipan. It sailed overhead, carried away on the wind from Coral D. Van Eyck followed it down, wings lazing around the equine head. Meanwhile Petit Manuel worked away at the next cloud. As he sprayed its sides, a familiar human head appeared through the tumbling mist. Manuel caricatured the high wavy mane, strong jaw but slipped mouth from the cloud with a series of deft passes, wing-tips almost touching each other as he dived in and out of the portrait.

The glossy white head, an unmistakable parody of Van Eyck in his own worst style, crossed the highway towards Vermilion Sands. Manuel slid out of the air, stalling his glider to a landing beside my car as Van Eyck stepped from his cockpit with a forced smile.

We waited for the third display. A cloud formed over Coral D, within a few minutes had blossomed into a pristine fair-weather cumulus. As it hung there Nolan's black-winged glider plunged out of the sun. He soared around the cloud, cutting away its tissues. The soft fleece fell towards us in a cool rain.

There was a shout from one of the cars. Nolan turned from the cloud, his wings slipping as if unveiling his handiwork. Illuminated by the afternoon sun was the serene face of a three-year old child. Its wide cheeks framed a placid mouth and plump chin. As one or two people clapped, Nolan sailed over the cloud and rippled the roof into ribbons and curls.

However, I knew that the real climax was yet to come. Cursed by some malignant virus, Nolan seemed unable to accept his own handiwork, always destroying it with the same cold humour. Petit Manuel had thrown away his cigarette, and even Van Eyck had turned his attention from the women in the cars.

Nolan soared above the child's face, following like a matador waiting for the moment of the kill. There was silence for a minute as

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he worked away at the cloud, and then someone slammed a car door in disgust.

Hanging above us was the white image of a skull.

The child's face, converted by a few strokes, had vanished, but in the notched teeth and gaping orbits, large enough to hold a car, we could still see an echo of its infant features. The spectre moved past us, the spectators frowning at this weeping skull whose rain fell upon their faces.

Half-heartedly I picked my old flying helmet off the back seat and began to carry it around the cars. Two of the spectators drove off before I could reach them. As I hovered about uncertainly, wondering why on earth a retired and well-to-do Air Force officer should be trying to collect these few dollar bills, Van Eyck stepped behind me and took the helmet from my hand.

"Not now, major. Look at what arrives—my apocalypse . . ."

A white Rolls-Royce, driven by a chauffeur in braided cream livery, had turned off the highway. Through the tinted communication window a young woman in a secretary's day suit spoke to the chauffeur. Beside her, a gloved hand still holding the window strap, a white-haired woman with jewelled eyes gazed up at the circling wings of the cloud-glider. Her strong and elegant face seemed sealed within the dark glass of the limousine like the enigmatic madonna of some marine grotto.

Van Eyck's glider rose into the air, soaring upwards to the cloud that hung above Coral D. I walked back to my car, searching the sky for Nolan. Above, Van Eyck was producing a pastiche Mona Lisa, a picture postcard gioconda as authentic as a plaster virgin. Its glossy finish shone in the over-bright sunlight as if enamelled together out of some cosmetic foam.

Then Nolan dived from the sun behind Van Eyck. Rolling his black-winged glider past Van Eyck's, he drove through the neck of the gioconda, and with the flick of a wing toppled the broad-cheeked head. It fell towards the cars below. The features disintegrated into a flaccid mess, sections of the nose and jaw tumbling through the steam. Then wings brushed. Van Eyck fired his spray gun at Nolan, and there was a flurry of torn fabric. Van Eyck fell from the air, steering his glider down to a broken landing.

I ran over to him. "Charles, do you have to play Von Richthofen? For God's sake, leave each other alone!"

Van Eyck waved me away. "Talk to Nolan, major. I'm not responsible for his air piracy." He stood in the cockpit, gazing over the cars as the shreds of fabric fell around him.

I walked back to my car, de-

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ciding that the time had come to disband the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. Fifty yards away the young secretary in the Rolls-Royce had stepped from the car and beckoned to me. Through the open door her mistress watched me with her jewelled eyes. Her white hair lay in a coil over one shoulder like a nacreous serpent.

I carried my flying helmet down to the young woman. Above a high forehead her auburn hair was swept back in a defensive bun, as if she were deliberately concealing part of herself. She stared with puzzled eyes at the helmet held out in front of her.

"I don't want to fly—what is it?"

"A grace," I explained. "For the repose of Michelangelo, Ed Keinholz and the cloud-sculptors of Coral D."

"Oh, my God. I think the chauffeur's the only one with any *money*. Look, do you perform anywhere else?"

"Perform?" I glanced from this pretty and agreeable young woman to the pale chimera with jewelled eyes in the dim compartment of the Rolls. She was watching the headless figure of the Mona Lisa as it moved across the desert floor towards Vermilion Sands. "We're not a professional troupe, as you've probably guessed. And obviously we'd need some fair-weather cloud. Where, exactly?"

"At Lagoon West." She took a snake-skinned diary from her handbag. "Miss Chanel is holding a series of garden parties. She wondered if you'd care to perform. Of course there would be a large fee."

"Chanel . . . Leonora Chanel, the . . .?"

The young woman's face again took on its defensive posture, dissociating her from whatever might follow. "Miss Chanel is at Lagoon West for the summer. By the way, there's one condition I must point out—Miss Chanel will provide the sole subject matter. You do understand?"

Fifty yards away Van Eyck was dragging his damaged glider towards my car. Nolan had landed, a caricature of Cyrano abandoned in mid-air. Petit Manuel limped to and fro, gathering together the equipment. In the fading afternoon light they resembled a threadbare circus troupe.

"All right," I agreed. "I take your point. But what about the clouds, Miss—?"

"Lafferty. Beatrice Lafferty. Miss Chanel will provide the clouds."

I walked around the cars with the helmet, then divided the money between Nolan, Van Eyck and Manuel. They stood in the gathering dusk, the few bills in their hands, watching the highway below.

Leonora Chanel stepped from

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the limousine and strolled into the desert. Her white-haired figure in its cobra-skinned coat wandered among the dunes. Sand-rays lifted around her, disturbed by the random movements of this sauntering phantasm of the burnt afternoon. Ignoring their open stings around her legs, she was gazing up at the aerial bestiary dissolving in the sky, and at the white skull a mile away over Lagoon West that had smeared itself across the sky.

At the time I first saw her, watching the cloud-sculptors of Coral D, I had only a half-formed impression of Leonora Chanel. The daughter of one of the world's leading financiers, she was an heiress both in her own right and on the death of her husband, a shy Monacan aristocrat, Comte Louis Chanel. The mysterious circumstances of his death at Cap Ferrat on the Riviera, officially described as suicide, had placed Leonora in a spotlight of publicity and gossip. She had escaped by wandering endlessly across the globe, from her walled villa in Tangier to an Alpine mansion in the snows above Pontresina, and from there to Palm Springs, Seville and Mykonos.

During these years of exile something of her character emerged from the magazine and newspaper photographs: moodily visiting a Spanish charity with the Duchess of Alba, or seated with Saroya and other members of cafe society on the terrace of Dali's villa at Port Lligat, her self-regarding face gazing out with its jewelled eyes at the diamond sea of the Costa Brava.

Inevitably her Garbo-like role seemed over-calculated, forever undermined by the suspicions of her own hand in her husband's death. The Count had been an introspective playboy who piloted his own aircraft to archaeological sites in the Peloponnese and whose mistress, a beautiful young Lebanese, was one of the world's pre-eminent keyboard interpreters of Bach. Why this reserved and pleasant man should have committed suicide was never made plain. What promised to be a significant exhibit at the coroner's inquest, a mutilated easel portrait of Leonora on which he was working, was accidentally destroyed before the hearing. Perhaps the painting revealed more of Leonora's character than she chose to see.

A week later, as I drove out to Lagoon West on the morning of the first garden party, I could well understand why Leonora Chanel had come to Vermilion Sands, to this bizarre, sand-bound resort with its lethargy, beach fatigue and shifting perspectives. Sonic statues grew wild along the beach, their voices keening as I swept past along the shore road. The fused

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silica on the surface of the lake formed an immense rainbow mirror that reflected the deranged colours of the sand-reefs, more vivid even than the cinnabar and cyclamen wing-panels of the cloud-gliders overhead. They soared in the sky above the lake like fitful dragonflies as Nolan, Van Eyck and Petit Manuel flew them from Coral D.

We had entered an inflamed landscape. Half a mile away the angular cornices of the summer house jutted into the vivid air as if distorted by some faulty junction of time and space. Behind it, like an exhausted volcano, a broad-topped mesa rose into the glazed air, its shoulders lifting the thermal currents high off the heated lake.

Envying Nolan and little Manuel these tremendous updraughts, more powerful than any we had known at Coral D, I drove towards the villa. Then the haze cleared along the beach and I saw the clouds.

A hundred feet above the roof of the mesa, they hung like the twisted pillows of a sleepless giant. Columns of turbulent air moved within the clouds, boiling upwards to the anvil heads like liquid in a cauldron. These were not the placid, fair-weather cumulus of Coral D, but storm-nimbus, unstable masses of overheated air that could catch an aircraft and lift it a thousand feet in a few seconds. Here and there the clouds were rimmed with dark bands, their towers crossed by valleys and ravines. They moved across the villa, concealed from the lakeside heat by the haze overhead, then dissolved in a series of violent shifts in the disordered air.

As I entered the drive behind a truck filled with *son et lumiere* equipment, a dozen members of the staff were straightening lines of gilt chairs on the terrace and unrolling panels of a marquee.

Beatrice Lafferty stepped across the cables. "Major Parker—there are the clouds we promised you."

I looked up again at the dark billows hanging like shrouds above the white villa. "Clouds, Beatrice? Those are tigers, tigers with wings. We're manicurists of the air, not dragon-tamers."

"Don't worry, a manicure is exactly what you're expected to carry out." With an arch glance, she added: "Your men do understand that there's to be only one subject?"

"Miss Chanel herself? Of course." I took her arm as we walked towards the balcony overlooking the lake. "You know, I think you enjoy these snide asides. Let the rich choose their materials—marble, bronze, plasma or cloud. Why not? Portraiture has always been a neglected art."

"My God, not here." She waited until a steward passed with a tray

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of table-cloths. "Carving one's portrait in the sky out of the sun and air—some people might say that smacked of vanity, or even worse sins."

"You're very mysterious. Such as?"

She played games with her eyes. "I'll tell you in a month's time when my contract expires. Now, when are your men coming?"

"They're here." I pointed to the sky over the lake. The three gliders hung in the overheated air, clumps of cloud-cotton drifting past them to dissolve in the haze. They were following a sand-yacht that approached the quay, its tyres throwing up the cerise dust. Behind the helmsman sat Leonora Chanel in a trouser suit of yellow alligator skin, her white hair hidden inside a black raffia toque.

As the helmsman moored the craft, Van Eyck and Petit Manuel put on an impromptu performance, shaping the fragments of cloud-cotton a hundred feet above the lake. First Van Eyck carved an orchid, then a heart and a pair of lips, while Manuel fashioned the head of a parakeet, two identical mice and the letters 'L.C.' As they dived and plunged around her, their wings sometimes touching the lake, Leonora stood on the quay, politely waving at each of these brief confections.

When they landed beside the quay, Leonora waited for Nolan to take one of the clouds, but he was sailing up and down the lake in front of her like a weary bird. Watching this strange chatelaine of Lagoon West, I noticed that she had slipped off into some private reverie, her gaze fixed on Nolan and oblivious of the people around her. Memories, caravels without sails, crossed the shadowy deserts of her burnt-out eyes.

Later that evening Beatrice Lafferty led me into the villa through the library window. There, as Leonora greeted her guests on the terrace, wearing a topless dress of sapphires and organdy, her breasts covered only by their contour jewellery, I saw the portraits that filled the villa. I counted more than twenty, from the formal society portraits in the drawing rooms, one by the President of the Royal Academy, another by Annigoni, to the bizarre psychological studies in the bar and dining room by Dali and Francis Bacon. Everywhere we moved, in the alcoves between the marble semi-columns, in gilt miniatures on the mantle shelves, even in the ascending mural that followed the staircase, we saw the same beautiful, self-regarding face. This colossal narcissism seemed to have become her last refuge, the only retreat for her fugitive self in its flight from the world.

Then, in the studio on the roof, we came across a large easel por-

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trait that had just been varnished. The artist had produced a deliberate travesty of the sentimental and powder-blue tints of a fashionable society painter, but beneath this gloss he had visualized Leonora as a dead Medea. The stretched skin below her right cheek, the sharp forehead and slipped mouth gave her the numbed and luminous appearance of a corpse.

My eyes moved to the signature. "Nolan! My God, were you here when he painted this?"

"It was finished before I came —two months ago. She refused to have it framed."

"No wonder." I went over to the window and looked down at the bedrooms hidden behind their awnings. "Nolan was *here*. The old studio near Coral D was his."

"But why should Leonora ask him back? They must have—"

"To paint her portrait again. I know Leonora Chanel better than you do, Beatrice. This time, though, the size of the sky."

We left the library and walked past the cocktails and canapes to where Leonora was welcoming her guests. Nolan stood beside her, wearing a suit of white suede. Now and then he looked down at her as if playing with the possibilities this self-obsessed woman gave to his macabre humour. Leonora clutched at his elbow. With the diamonds fixed around her eyes she reminded me of some archaic priestess. Beneath the contour jewellery her breasts lay like eager snakes.

Van Eyck introduced himself with an exaggerated bow. Behind him came Petit Manuel, his twisted head ducking nervously among the tuxedos.

Leonora's mouth shut in a rictus of distaste. She glanced at the white plaster on my foot. "Nolan, you fill your world with cripples. Your little dwarf—will he fly too?"

Petit Manuel looked at her with eyes like crushed flowers.

The performance began an hour later. The dark-rimmed clouds were lit by the sun setting behind the mesa, the air crossed by wraiths of cirrus like the gilded frames of the immense paintings to come. Van Eyck's glider rose in a spiral towards the face of the first cloud, stalling and climbing again as the turbulent updraughts threw him across the air.

As the cheekbones began to appear, as smooth and lifeless as carved foam, applause rang out from the guests seated on the terrace. Five minutes later, when Van Eyck's glider swooped down onto the lake, I could see that he had excelled himself. Lit by the searchlights, and with the overture to Tristan sounding from the loudspeaker on the slopes of the mesa, as if inflating this huge bauble, the portrait of Leonora moved

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overhead, a faint rain falling from it. By luck the cloud remained stable until it passed the shoreline, and then broke up in the evening air as if ripped from the sky by an irritated hand.

Petit Manuel began his ascent, sailing in on a dark-edged cloud like an urchin accosting a bad-tempered matron. He soared to and fro, as if unsure how to shape this unpredictable column of vapour, then began to carve it into the approximate contours of a woman's head. He seemed more nervous than I had ever seen him. As he finished a second round of applause broke out, soon followed by laughter and ironic cheers.

The cloud, sculptured into a flattering likeness of Leonora, had begun to tilt, rotating in the disturbed air. The jaw lengthened, the glazed smile became that of an idiot's. Within a minute the gigantic head of Leonora Chanel hung upside down above us.

Discreetly I ordered the searchlights switched off, and the audience's attention turned to Nolan's black-winged glider as it climbed towards the next cloud. Shards of dissolving tissue fell from the darkening air, the spray concealing whatever ambiguous creation Nolan was carving. To my surprise, the portrait that emerged was wholly lifelike. There was a burst of applause, a few bars of Tannhauser, and the searchlights lit up the elegant head. Standing among her guests, Leonora raised her glass to Nolan's glider.

Puzzled by Nolan's generosity, I looked more closely at the gleaming face, and then realised what he had done. The portrait, with cruel irony, was all too lifelike. The downward turn of Leonora's mouth, the chin held up to smooth her neck, the fall of flesh below her right cheek—all these were carried on the face of the cloud as they had been in his painting in the studio.

Around Leonora the guests were congratulating her on the performance. She was looking up at her portrait as it began to break up over the lake, seeing it for the first time. The veins held the blood in her face.

Then a fireworks display on the beach blotted out these ambiguities in its pink and blue explosions.

Shortly before dawn Beatrice Lafferty and I walked along the beach among the shells of burnt-out rockets and catherine wheels. On the deserted terrace a few lights shone through the darkness onto the scattered chairs. As we reached the steps, a woman's voice cried out somewhere above us. There was the sound of smashed glass. A french window was kicked back, and a dark-haired man in a white suit ran between the tables.

As Nolan disappeared along the drive, Leonora Chanel walked

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out into the centre of the terrace. She looked at the dark clouds surging over the mesa, and with one hand tore the jewels from her eyes. They lay winking on the tiles at her feet. Then the hunched figure of Petit Manuel leapt from his hiding place in the bandstand. He scuttled past, racing on his bent legs.

An engine started by the gates. Leonora began to walk back to the villa, staring at her broken reflections in the glass below the window. She stopped as a tall, blond-haired man with cold and eager eyes stepped from the sonic statues outside the library. Disturbed by the noise, the statues had begun to whine. As Van Eyck moved towards Leonora they took up the slow beat of his steps.

The next day's performance was the last by the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. All afternoon, before the guests arrived, a dim light lay over the lake. Immense tiers of storm-nimbus were massing behind the mesa, and any performance at all seemed unlikely.

Van Eyck was with Leonora. As I arrived, Beatrice Lafferty was watching their sand-yacht carry them unevenly across the lake, its sails shipped by the squalls.

"There's no sign of Nolan or little Manuel," she told me. "The party starts in three hours."

I took her arm. "The party's already over. When you're finished here, Bea, come and live with me at Coral D. I'll teach you to sculpt the clouds."

Van Eyck and Leonora came ashore half an hour later. Van Eyck stared through my face as he brushed past. Leonora clung to his arm, the day-jewels around her eyes scattering their hard light across the terrace.

By eight, when the first guests began to appear, Nolan and Petit Manuel had still not arrived. On the terrace the evening was warm and lamplit, but overhead the storm-clouds sidled past each other like uneasy giants. I walked up the slope to where the gliders were tethered. Their wings shivered in the updraughts.

Barely half a minute after he rose into the darkening air, dwarfed by an immense tower of storm-nimbus, Charles Van Eyck was spinning towards the ground, his glider toppled by the crazed air. He recovered fifty feet from the villa and climbed on the updraughts from the lake, well away from the spreading chest of the cloud. He soared in again. As Leonora and her guests watched from their seats, the glider was hurled back over their heads in an explosion of vapour, then fell towards the lake with a broken wing.

I walked towards Leonora. Standing by the balcony were Nolan and Petit Manuel, watching Van Eyck climb from the cockpit

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of his glider three hundred yards away.

To Nolan I said: "Why bother to come? Don't tell me you're going to fly?"

Nolan leaned against the rail, hands in the pockets of his suit. "I'm not— that's why I'm here."

Leonora was wearing an evening dress of peacock feathers that lay around her legs in an immense train. The hundreds of eyes gleamed in the electric air before the storm, sheathing her body in their blue flames.

"Miss Chanel, the clouds are like madmen," I apologised. "There's a storm on its way."

She looked up at me with unsettled eyes. "Don't you people expect to take risks?" She gestured at the storm-nimbus that swirled over our heads. "For clouds like these I need a Michelangelo of the sky . . . What about Nolan? Is he too frightened as well?"

As she shouted his name, Nolan stared at her, then turned his back to us. The light over Lagoon West had changed. Half the lake was covered by a dim pall.

There was a tug on my sleeve. Petit Manuel looked up at me with his crafty child's eyes. "Raymond, I can go. Let me take the glider."

"Manuel, for God's sake. You'll kill—"

He darted between the gilt chairs. Leonora frowned as he plucked her wrist.

"Miss Chanel . . ." His loose mouth formed an encouraging smile. "I'll sculpt for you. Right now, a big storm-cloud, eh?"

She stared down at him, half-repelled by this eager hunchback ogling her beside the hundred eyes of her peacock train. Van Eyck was limping back to the beach from his wrecked glider. I guessed that in some strange way Manuel was pitting himself against Van Eyck.

Leonora grimaced, as if swallowing some poisonous phlegm. "Major Parker, tell him to—" She glanced at the dark cloud boiling over the mesa like the effluvium of some black-hearted volcano. "Wait! Let's see what the little cripple can do!" She turned on Manuel with an over-bright smile. "Go on, then. Let's see you sculpt a whirlwind!"

In her face the diagram of bones formed a geometry of murder.

Nolan ran past across the terrace, his feet crushing the peacock feathers as Leonora laughed. We tried to stop Manuel, but he raced up the slope. Stung by Leonora's taunt, he skipped among the rocks, disappearing from sight in the darkening air. On the terrace a small crowd gathered to watch.

The yellow and tangerine glider rose into the sky and climbed across the face of the storm-cloud. Fifty yards from the dark billows it

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was buffetted by the shifting air, but Manuel soared in and began to cut away at the dark face. Drops of black rain fell across the terrace at our feet.

The first outline of a woman's head appeared, satanic eyes lit by the open vents in the cloud, a sliding mouth like a dark smear as the huge billows boiled forwards. Nolan shouted in warning from the lake as he climbed into his glider. A moment later little Manuel's craft was lifted by a powerful updraught and tossed over the roof of the cloud. Fighting the insane air, Manuel plunged the glider downwards and drove into the cloud again. Then its immense face opened, and in a sudden spasm the cloud-surged forward and swallowed the glider.

There was silence on the terrace as the crushed body of the craft revolved in the centre of the cloud. It moved over our heads, dismembered pieces of the wings and fuselage churned about in the dissolving face. As it reached the lake, the cloud began its violent end. Pieces of the face slewed sideways, the mouth was torn off, an eye exploded. It vanished in a last brief squall.

The pieces of Petit Manuel's glider fell from the bright air.

Beatrice Lafferty and I drove across the lake to collect Manuel's body. After the spectacle of this death within the exploding replica of their hostess's face, the guests began to leave. Within minutes the drive was full of cars. Leonora watched them go, standing with Van Eyck among the deserted tables.

Beatrice said nothing as we drove out. The pieces of the shattered glider lay over the fused sand, tags of canvas and broken struts, control lines tied into knots. Then yards from the cockpit I found Petit Manuel's body, lying in a wet ball like a drowned monkey.

I carried him back to the sand-yacht.

"Raymond!" Beatrice pointed to the shore. Storm-clouds were massed along the entire length of the lake, and the first flashes of lightning were striking in the hills behind the mesa. In the electric air the villa had lost its glitter. Half a mile away a tornado was moving along the valley floor, its trunk swaying towards the lake.

The first gusts of air struck the yacht. Beatrice shouted again: "Raymond! Nolan's there—he's flying inside it!"

Then I saw the black-winged glider circling under the umbrella of the tornado, Nolan himself riding in the whirlwind. His wings held steady in the revolving air around the funnel. Like a pilot fish he soared in, as if steering the tornado towards Leonora's villa.

Twenty seconds later, when it struck the house, I lost sight of

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him. An explosion of dark air overwhelmed the villa, a churning centrifuge of shattered chairs and tiles that burst over the roof. Beatrice and I ran from the yacht, and lay together in a fault in the glass surface. As the tornado moved away, fading into the storm-filled sky, a dark squall hung over the wrecked villa, now and then flicking the debris into the air. Shreds of canvas and peacock feathers fell around us.

We waited half an hour before approaching the house. Hundreds of smashed glasses and broken chairs littered the terrace. At first I could see no signs of Leonora, although her face was everywhere, the portraits with their slashed profiles strewn on the damp tiles. An eddying smile floated towards me from the disturbed air, and wrapped itself around my leg.

Leonora's body lay among the broken tables near the bandstand, half-wrapped in a bleeding canvas. Her face was as bruised now as the storm-cloud Manuel had tried to carve.

We found Van Eyck in the wreck of the marquee. He was suspended by the neck from a tangle of electric wiring, his pale face wreathed in a noose of light bulbs. The current flowed intermittently through the wiring, lighting up his strangled eyes.

I leaned against the overturned Rolls, holding Beatrice's shoulders. "There's no sign of Nolan—no pieces of his glider."

"Poor man. Raymond, he was driving that whirlwind here. Somehow he was controlling it."

I walked across the damp terrace to where Leonora lay. I began silently to cover her with the shreds of canvas, the torn faces of herself.

I took Beatrice Lafferty to live with me in Nolan's studio in the desert near Coral D. We heard no more of Nolan, and never flew the gliders again. The clouds carry too many memories. Three months ago a man who saw the derelict gliders outside the studio stopped near Coral D and walked across to us. He told us he had seen a man flying a glider in the sky high above Red Beach, carving the strato-cirrus into images of jewels and children's faces. Once there was a dwarf's head.

On reflection, that sounds rather like Nolan, so perhaps he managed to get away from the tornado. In the evenings Beatrice and I sit among the sonic statues, listening to their voices as the fair-weather clouds rise above Coral D, waiting for a man in a dark-winged glider, perhaps painted like candy now, who will come in on the wind and carve for us images of sea-horses and unicorns, dwarfs and jewels and children's faces. ◀

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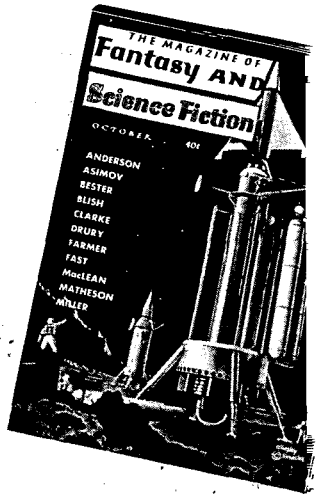

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